



OBADDION

OBADDION



Chapter One

Melons

Cold. Dark. Loud.
Bad things.
New things.
Light. Not sun.
Noise. Screams. Smooth rock.
Small animals... pale... two legs...
Food?
No.
Bright light... pain.
Pain.
Not food.
Cave.
Smooth floors. Smooth walls.
Smells of bad. Bad things.
Smell blood. Fear.
More light. More pain.
Cave may be safe.
Get to the cave!
Yes.
Cave... nice.
Good cave.
Smooth rock... metal... moves. Screaming.
Darkness. Safe.

#

One week.
Seven days.
In the cave. A strange cave. I do not like it.

Neighbor. Something beside me. Can't see it. It screams.
For one week.
Seven days.
Time is measured. This is a new thought.
Thoughts. They were more simple before.
Food. Light. Darkness. Warmth. Cold.
I... I never thought of myself.
Myself.
What do they call me?
Obaddion?
Yes. They... the two-legged beasts call me... Obaddion.
I am Obaddion, as the sun is sun and trees are trees.
What are the two-legged things?
Food?
No. They are not food.
They give me food though.
Even though I tried to eat them.
Never again.
Sorry.
I am sorry.
They do not hurt me... unless I try to eat them. They give me food.
Food.
Savory things... skin and bone and flesh... meat.
Deer, boar, elk, bear.
Good meat.
Here meat is different.
Dead. Cold. No fur.
Bricks of stuff that smells like meat... tastes like dirt. Still food.
Sweet things too. Fruit.
Fruit is good. Berries.
Melons. Green like leaves, sweet like berries.

Apples. Red as blood. Oranges, bright like the sun.
One of them gives me fruit. Nice.
Maybe I should share.
Sometimes... back... in the woods... I shared with birds.
Mostly because I wanted to eat them.
But birds are too fast to be eaten.
Fish. Fish is good. I want fish.
Maybe the fruit-giver will give me fish.

#

Present.
I saved a melon. It was very hard not to eat it.
I am proud that I did not.
Humans come.
Humans?
Yes.
They are humans. I am Obaddion.
Names are nice.
Usually I hide... in the back.
They have cold metal sticks with hot light...
...painful things...
...but I must be nice and share... because they give me food, so I
should give some back.

I offer my melon. It is a good melon.

#

The metal sticks are very painful.

#

I do not know why they did not want my melon.
Oh well. It tasted delicious.

#

Humans only come some days. Many days they do not come.
I am alone.

I was alone before.
 But the woods were not lonely.
 There were birds. I like birds.
 Leaves. They are pretty, like birds.
 Trees. Mud. Mud is fun to lay in.
 Water. Not in a dish. Cleaner than dish-water.
 I had a cave. It was warm and dry when the outside was cold and wet.
 This cave is cold and wet when I pee.
 I have to wait. Humans come and clean it. That is nice.
 I am not sure if they like me though.
 Maybe I scare them. They are small. So they must sting like ants.
 One is very nice. He gives me good food.
 Yesterday he gave me fish.
 Fish is delicious.
 Thank you for the fish.
 I try sharing.
 He runs away.
 Maybe he does not like fish.
 It was still a good day, because I had fish, and fish is good.
 Sadly, I ate all the fish.

#

Many days pass.
 Mostly I sleep, and wait to be fed.
 It is simple.
 I am bored.
 Sometimes I chew on my water dish.
 Humans do not like that. I get a new dish, but they yell and use the
 metal sticks.
 So I stop.
 At least I can nap. I like naps.

#

Most caves do not have walls that move. This one does. It is a fancy cave.

Humans watch me through a barrier I cannot see.

Glass.

I tried to walk through it the first time.

They laughed.

Sometimes they bring flat things with lights that flash. I do not like the lights.

Some light is good.

Sun. Moon. Stars.

Those are nice lights.

Perhaps humans do not have a sun, moon, or stars, so they make new ones.

I'd say they need to improve.

There is a window on one wall. It is small.

If I stand up tall and straight, I can peak through it.

Outside there is light sometimes and darkness others.

Metal things flash by.

Everything is cold and grey and smells of... oil.

I prefer my cave.

#

Night.

I am scared.

Metal things scream outside, louder than any animal. Their lights sweep in through my window and swim across the walls.

There was a bad storm in the forest once, one that knocked over trees.

I counted many fallen trees.

The metal beasts make noises like that. They have blinding lights and oil for blood.

I know because once one of the cave walls moved and I followed a tunnel into a big, bright place with lots of humans. They were loud. I tried to turn back but the tunnel closed up.

There was a metal beast. It seemed to be dead. So I tried eating it.

You cannot eat the metal beasts.

I got mad and threw it against the wall.

The humans liked that.

They threw down melons for me.

They are nice.

More metal things. I broke them and roared.

The humans cheered. Eventually I got to go back into my cave.

#

The wall moves.

Glass is strange, reflective like a pond but hard as rock.

I press my face up against it and look one of the humans in the eye.

She backs away, disturbed.

Do I scare them?

I don't mean to.

I just want more fish.

#

I see myself in the glass.

Reflection.

Like the surface of a pond on a calm day.

I miss the sounds of frogs.

My face is red... like blood... like the setting sun. My skin is black... my belly is a dirty cream. All is bumpy and wrinkled.

This is me.

What am I?

Obaddion.

But what is Obaddion?

My name.

Are there any others?

#

They left a light box in there. It hangs from the wall. It is bigger than any I have seen before.

It flickers on. There is noise.

An animal. A... FISH!

I lunge at the glass, instinctively, and hurt my lip.

Ow.

I must remember that the glass is there and glass is hard.

Different animals on the light box. They have names. I know because a human voice says them. I wonder why humans can talk and I cannot. Maybe I just need to learn.

What am I?

I watch the animals and try to figure it out.



Bits and pieces. I look like many. A crocodile's face with teeth like a bear and ears like a wolf. An elephant's skin. A pangolin's tail. A porcupine's quills on my neck. Porcupines. They do not taste good.

Another show.

Show. That is what the things on the light box are called. Maybe because it shows them.

Humans scream and run from scaly beasts that look like lizards and walk like birds. One is very big and has a sail on its back. It comes out of the river at night and attacks them on a metal thing... a boat. That is a name. The metal beasts outside look different than boats though.

I have a body and a sail like the lizard-bird... the *Spinosaurus*.

A dinosaur. I learn that it is a dinosaur. Humans like them, even if they always run from them. The dinosaurs do not seem to like them back.

I stay up late and watch dinosaur shows until the dinosaur shows end.

#

It's hot.

I prefer it to be cold. With rain.

Rain is nice. It flows down my wrinkly skin and washes away the dust.

Of course, sometimes it is too cold.

When I first arrived in the...

...no, not a room. Not a cave either, it's a...

...*cell*. Yes, that'll do.

When I first arrived in this cell, it was very cold.

There was a little warm metal thing, though. I always kept close to it.

One time, they gave me a blanket. I liked the blanket.

I think the one who gave me the blanket was the same one who gave me watermelons.

Sadly, they took the blanket away after I accidentally peed on it.

But I got some food after, which made up for losing the blanket.

Food.

Now I'm hungry. I'm almost always hungry. Eating is something I'm very good at.

#

A bowl, like the water dish, but smaller. Something red.

Like little apples... fruit! When I was in the woods, there were lots of blackberries in summer. But they grew on sharp stems with spikes that hurt and leaves that tasted bad. So I had to be careful when I ate them.

There are no sharp stems here. They are very nice that way, the way they keep me.

Keepers.

I know because the light-box showed animals (which, for reasons I am still trying to figure out, I could not eat) and those animals had keepers

and the keepers gave them food. These animals lived outside though. I miss being outside.

Here it is all smooth stone with a few cracks and dirty patches. Concrete. Too hard to break.

There are little metal ventilation grates by the floor and a light that hangs from the ceiling, a bright white that flickers on and off during storms.

I miss the sun.

Back to the fruit. I can't really make out a smell, but the colors are brilliant.

Cherries they're called. For some reason I think they're a lot bigger than normal cherries, but I've never had cherries before. Sometimes you just know things. I guess knowing this is just instinct, but it feels like a memory.

I eat them one at a time, so it's easier to work the seed past the fruit and spit it out.

Spitting the seeds at the wall leaves a splash of spit and red juice. Some take shapes like puddles, others like messy flowers. The seeds pile up on the hard floor below.

It is very quiet today. There are no loud metal noises. The clanging is gone too.

The creature that lived in the cell beside me has stopped screaming. I heard lots of loud voices last night. Maybe they told it to stop.

I spit more cherry seeds and swallow the sweet fruit. The sound of the hard seed hitting the wall is the only thing breaking the silence.

Still hot.

I lay down and open my mouth because that's what I always use to do on hot days, unless I could find some water to swim in. I miss the lake. There were rivers too. I'd follow them through the woods and eat mushrooms and leaves and then nap in a nice sunny spot and let the water clean my skin.

Still hungry.

Unfortunately, there are no more cherries. Just seeds.

I drink some of my water and dump the rest over my head.

Maybe that was a bad idea. Now I have no more water.

To save what little I can, I lick the floor.

#

Yes, dumping my water dish was a mistake. The keepers come in the following morning with mops. They are mad at me and show the hot sticks they used... not sticks... metal things.

Another memory. I think they're called prods. They aren't hot either... electric... like the false suns and stars I see.

I try to apologize, but I don't think my keepers understand. They scream a lot and jab with the prods.

They hurt.

#

Thankfully they refill my water dish. I get more food too. It is the hard kibble kind, but it is still food.

#

Today they gave me a pig.

It is a very strange pig. The ones in the woods were brown and hairy. This one is pink and pale, with short, soft fur. It is also dead, and cold.

I sniff it but decide it could be dangerous. It smells weird.

The keeper who gives me watermelons is the one who brought the pig. They are nice.

Out comes a sharp metal thing, a knife. They cut the pig open.

I smell the blood. It is good.

Turns out, the pig is safe. And delicious. They record me eating with a flat, miniature light-box. I eat half and save the rest for later.

#

Painting.

I don't realize that's what I'm doing at first, but I dipped my hand in the blood and splattered it against the wall. Blood is an alarming red sometimes, a sign of a meal others. Here it is beautiful.

Soon I realize I can guide it... shape it. I make images out of it on the walls... things I remember. Messy but close enough. At least some of them are.

I make trees first because trees are beautiful and there are no trees in my cell. Maybe someday I'll get a bigger cell with trees. For now, I'll make my own.

Next I try a river. Red river... water... I'd say it looks better than my paintings of trees.

Again I plunge my hand in the pig carcass. It comes out scarlet red, and I slam it against the wall. It leaves a big, dripping stain like a pond. I add four legs and a head, so the pond becomes a bear. Maybe I'm magic.

It is a very fat bear.

Fat bears are funny. I laugh.

At least I think it's a laugh. I've never laughed before.

I'm very proud of my fat bear.

I think, next time they give me a pig, I'll make a fat frog too. At this time of year I used to be able to hear them croaking at night. A pretty sound. It helped me sleep.

My wall is red in many places now, a scarlet forest. Not the nicest looking, but if I practice I should be able to get better.

Hungry again. I finish the pig and lick the blood off my hands.

I wonder if all animals here are pale, like some of my keepers. Pale deer, pale birds.

Pale denizens of a metal forest.

It's a strange thought. Thinking is tiring. But I can't help but think. The question is, why did I never think before? The answer eludes me.

Time for a nap.

The next day humans look at my paintings and talk with words I don't understand.

Do they like them?

They get wet rags and a mop and wipe it away.

Seems they don't.

I don't understand why.

#

Loud noises. The gate opens.

I smell food...

Food!

Something to do. The gate leads to the arena. I know this. There's lots of humans there. They're loud and smell bad. But they like it when I come out. They cheer. I think that is a good thing.

They also like it when I break things. Everyone cheered when I threw the car. I enjoyed throwing it too. I also enjoyed when they tossed down some watermelons.

They were delicious.

This time the path is different. It weaves around instead of going straight. It's more brightly-lit too. I smell the melons... faintly...

There's also the smell of blood... meat.

I'm very hungry.

Bright light. I've walked out into another arena. It smells of old things, sweat and grime... and fear.

I try to turn back, but the gate's already closed.

Metal sounds. I must remind myself that the metal things aren't alive.

A gate opposite to mine begins to open. Something's struggling within. It screams, sounding like a dying animal, a frightened child.

Screens over the arena flash with bright colors and words I don't know. A shrill, excited voice announces a name:

Atrox.

The gate flies open with a screech. I am afraid.

The monster Atrox is slightly taller than I am and a pale, slimy pink in color, like raw chicken. It stands on its hindlegs like a human and has long arms like a human too, but its fingers end in claws and its face is an upturned beak with many teeth but no eyes. The claws are very long and curve like sickles.

It comes out screaming.

People cheer.

In an instant Atrox takes a flying leap in my direction and kicks me across the face.

I'm knocked sideways against a wall, Atrox has already circled behind me and sunk its claws into my sides. It drags them back and rips the flesh, and I hear myself screaming.

I twist around and bite its ankle. Atrox makes a howling, gurgling sound and wrenches its talons loose, opting instead to pummel me with hard, bony fists. I taste blood and bite down harder.

Now Atrox kicks my stomach and grabs my head. One of the claws hangs dangerously close to my eye, and I scream for a second before it starts slamming my head into the hard concrete. Something breaks, and there's blood.

Again I scream. The humans up in the stands cheer.

Don't they see the blood?

Help me!

No one does. I can't talk, only scream. But shouldn't that be enough?

Atrox grabs me by the tail and swings me into another wall. The entirety of myself is jarred by it, I try to get up but it's already on me, pinning my face to the ground with one hand while it rips into my stomach with another. I scream and convulse but it's too strong, all muscle and oily hide that's too slick to grab, too slippery for my magnificent teeth.

I writhe and cry in place, unable to free myself. Atrox's talons rip away the skin and muscle. More blood, as if there wasn't enough already.

No... no! Help me!

Please...

Something comes out, I look to see my insides spilling out on the floor. Pink intestines steaming in the brilliant spotlights, moist and curled like worms. Atrox rips more out, yanking on them with long, cruel fingers. It looks at me without eyes and pulls its toothy mouth into a smile.

I'll kill you... you... kill...

My spasms land a kick straight in Atrox's groin, sending it stumbling backwards.

I feel something... fear...

...and rage.

There's a low, guttural howling. I realize it's myself, gathering up my spilled innards with one hand while I steady myself with the other.

Humans in the stands clamor like ballistic apes. Atrox is back on its feet.

In an instant it charges, leaping like a frog.

Despite being the size of an elephant, Atrox is as quick and nimble as a mouse.

Something takes hold and I swerve to the side, driving my longest shoulder spine straight through my opponent's head. There's blood and the sound of bones cracking... awful... but somehow I relish it.

Atrox wrenches its head free, snapping off my spine in the process, and steps back a ways before it collapses on itself, the upper half of its bulky form bending backwards over the trembling legs. A mixture of blood and excreta begins pouring from my ruptured stomach, splattering on the ground like tainted rain.

I collapse, still clutching my innards... they're slippery...

Everywhere I look there's noise and light... bright, ugly lights, false suns...

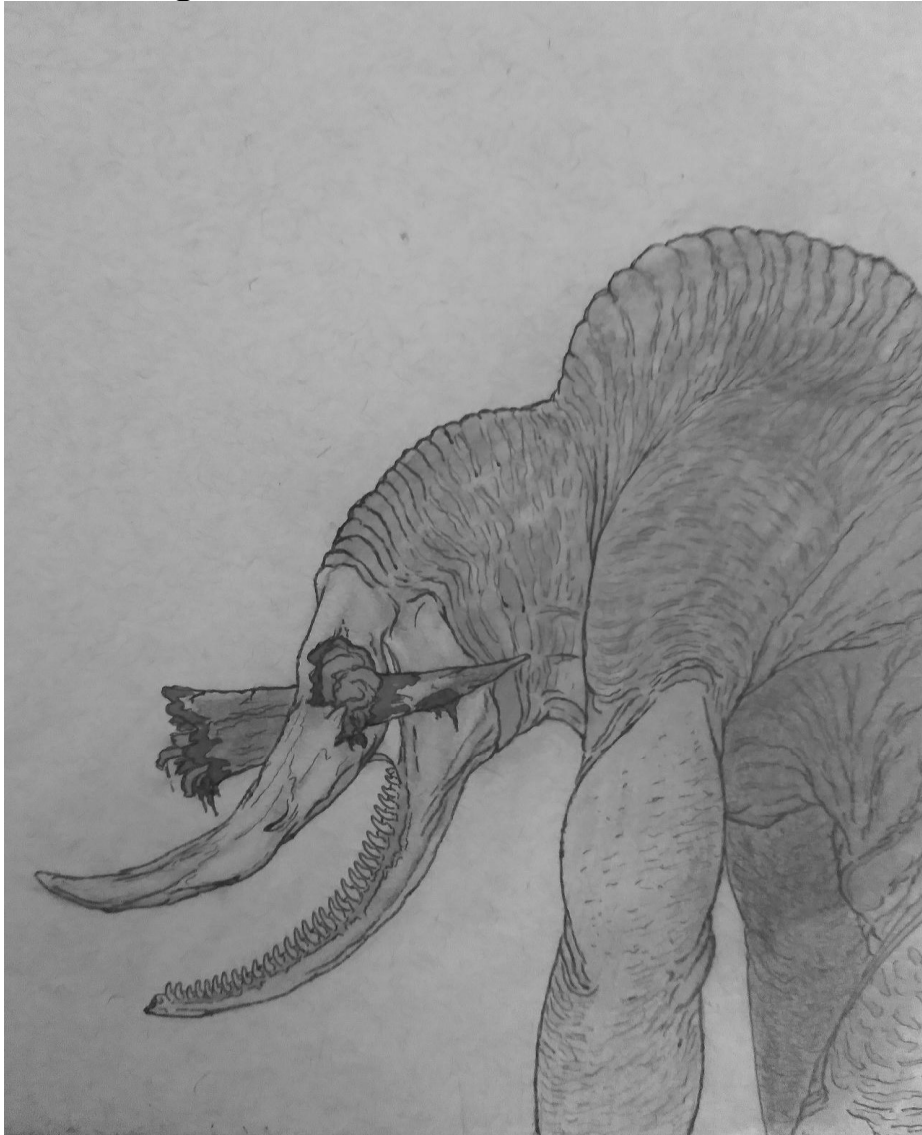
The people are too loud... why do they like this? Why aren't they helping me?

Don't they care? Why are they so... cruel?

I'm tired... a nap would be nice... just a little sleep...

Just need to heal... just a short rest...

As my eyes begin to close, I see Atrox realigning itself. Its torso jerks up with a snapping sound, arms dangling like vines. It cocks its head at me, still impaled, and grins.



No...

I remember a word... one I never used before... an angry word.

Shit...

It's walking towards me... no...

I can't get up...

I can't get up!

No, no, no! Stop, dammit!

Stop! Please!

No!

Dammit, just stop! Just kill me already!

Please...

Atrox begins to feed, and I hear myself screaming for help. I'm calling for someone, someone familiar, someone I love... but I don't know who...

Chapter Two

Rain Against the Pines

Not in the cell...

...no... where?

Something's on my face... some kind of glass thing... full of steam... tubes...

...I feel numb...

...and tired.

Help me...

Atrox.

Atrox is gone... I think. Good.

Voices. Human.

Human?

That is what they are called... yes... humans. Humanity. People. Mankind.

I'm not sure I like them.

They made me... fight Atrox... hurt me...

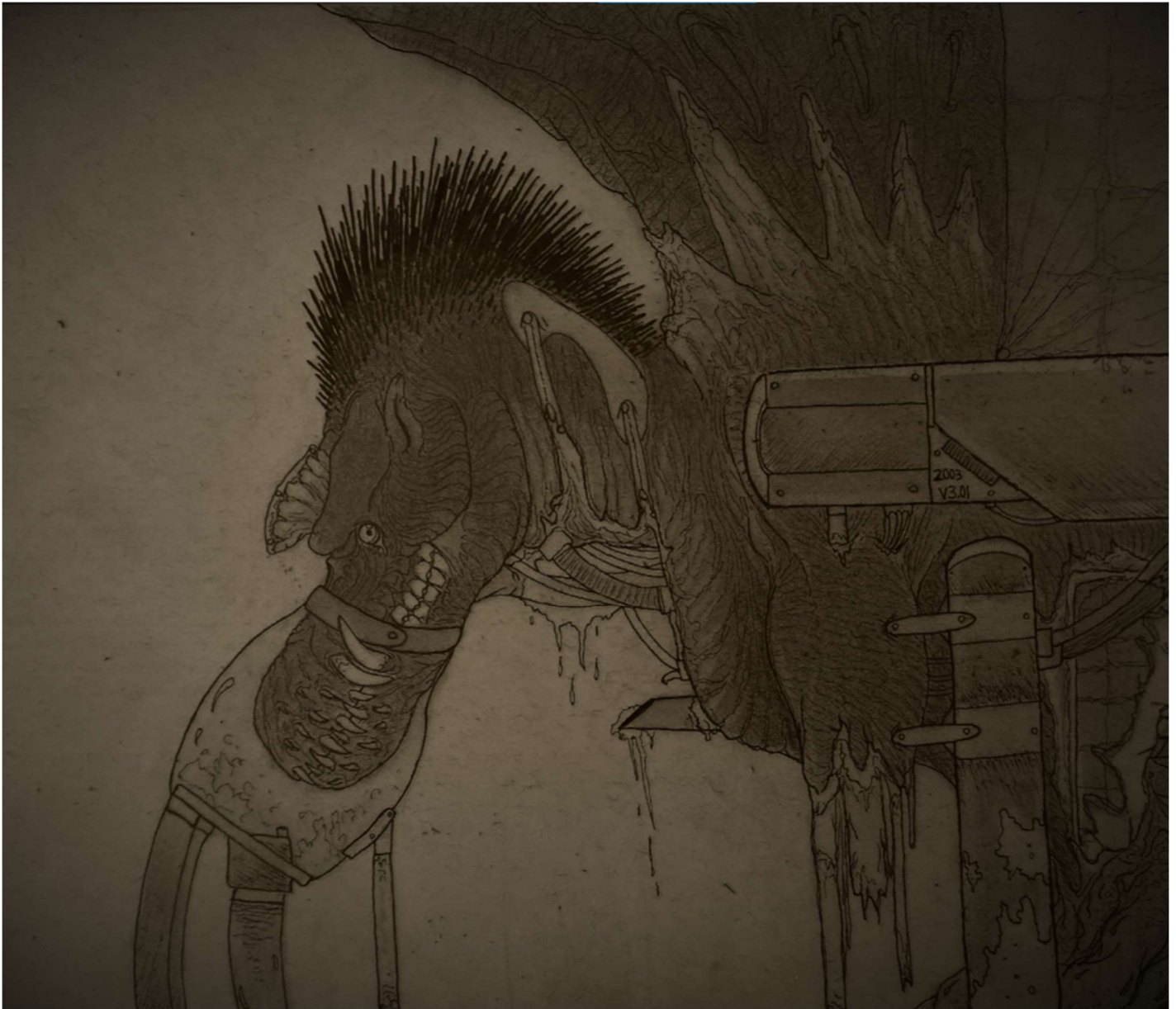
...the prods... human prods...

...the cell... man-made...

...all of these... painful... things... from humans.

But they also gave me food... and water... and a blanket.

Maybe they don't understand...



...it hurts...

Something new...

...tubes and wires... intestines... stomach... liver...

...they're attaching things inside of me... washing out my innards
with... something.

New parts.

Am I a... machine?

No... they smell of flesh... blood... not the appetizing kind though...

My old parts are piled up in a bin... covered in teeth marks...

Atrox...

I do not like Atrox.

Atrox hurt me... and it liked it. It smiled.

Humans hurt me too...

...and they liked it.

But they also helped me...

...and hurt me...

...I'm not sure.

Tired. Not the good kind.

I miss my cave...

#

I watched a show today...

Show... on the... television...

It's all coming back... as if I had these words in my head before, and I'm just recollecting them, but I never remember thinking like that.

Sometimes I think I have a different brain.

Or maybe I'm just getting smarter with age. I got stronger with age after all.

It's been a... week... I think. Since I fought... Atrox... the one I hate.



New organs. At first I vomited whenever I tried to eat, but it got better. My sides hurt though.

Maybe I hate the humans too, but they gave me food and television and new organs. Those are good things. All Atrox gave was pain, therefore Atrox is nothing but... cruel.

Cruel.

I fought too.

I caused pain. Maybe I am cruel...

No, I was defending myself. I would have never tried to eat Atrox...

Bored. More and more I am bored. I used to be able to entertain myself by staring at the wall, or thinking about food, or just not thinking at all, but more and more frequently that doesn't work. Thankfully I like to sleep, and sleeping helps pass the time. I am very good at naps.

Where was I? Yes, the show...

It had angels... I'd heard of them before...

...and I thought angel meant "delicious" because when they said it they were talking about a cake. So I thought angels were food and wanted to eat them.

Turns out they're actually pretty dudes with wings.

They take people up to Heaven and deliver messages from God.

Who is God?

Apparently he makes things. Birds make things too, nests. Maybe God is a giant bird.

Maybe, if I fight... Atrox... again, the angels will take me to Heaven. I heard it is a good place. I used to think this cell was a good place... but I'm not really sure anymore. Maybe this is something bad, or maybe it's just something I'll grow out of.

#

Another show. It was old but had good music.

There were people and they talked for a long time but then a dinosaur showed up. A big one, bigger than the buildings, and he peaked over the top of a hill and roared. More people talking. I started to sleep.

Someone said that the dinosaur wasn't always that way... that it lived peacefully in the ocean... until they dropped a bomb on it, and the bomb made it grow huge and powerful. I wondered if a bomb was what made my mind different. What got me here.

Again came the dinosaur, pulling down electric wires and burning the city.

It was supposed to be an evil scene. I knew because they played scary music and it was dark and the people were scared... but I found myself rooting for the dinosaur.

#

Not a dinosaur... a monster...

I am a monster.

What is a monster?

Something big... something scary... something that fights.

I'm starting to heal, but my sides still hurt. Sometimes they take me out of my cell into another cell made entirely of glass. The first time I went there were people everywhere with flashing lights and loud voices. I was scared, so I tried to break out.

The glass is too thick. Some of the small people... children... began to cry. I felt bad. I did not mean to make them cry.

#

It's been a few months.

Getting cold again.

This time of year, it rains a lot. I hear rain outside. It is a good sound.

I used to sit in my cave and look out into the woods when it rained. I'd listen to the gentle pitter-patter as it sprinkled against the pine trees and drift off into sleep.

Rain against the pines.

A good memory.

Colder here. I smell the rain... but no trees. Only metal things... lifeless things.

They've begun turning my heater on at night. It does a bad job.

How long have I been here?

It was fall when... they took me... it had to be them.

That was last year, because now it is fall again.

I have been in the cell for half of a fall, a winter, a spring, a summer, and now another half of a fall. That is a long time. I do not think that they will ever be letting me out.

Fall is a good time. Birthday.

I don't remember being born. But my oldest memories are from fall... leaves... red... like blood... yellow like suns. Catching fish... delicious fish. Salmon. They swam up the rivers in fall to lay their eggs. I liked eating them. In one day I caught and ate over fifty salmon.

Birds... they liked eating them too. Eagles, some with white heads and black bodies... bigger than the other birds... free as rulers of the sky... like angels. Free... I wish that I were an eagle. Crows... black as night... beautiful but with ugly voices. They were very loud... so were the gulls... sleek and grey like... planes... I hear planes sometimes... they're louder than any monster.

Monster.

Monsters on the TV. A giant ape. A giant moth. A giant lizard. Always too big for their own good, too strong. People don't like monsters. That's why they shoot at them or put them in cages... in cells...

...my cell.

Or they fight them with robots. Metal things in the image of man. Humans seem to be very self-centered.

Robots with giant swords, robots with giant guns... why build something just to shoot a giant gun? The television doesn't make much sense sometimes.

I was falling asleep the other night when I heard my name on the television. Too tired to have cared to look. Maybe I should have...

#

Another fight. I've healed, I guess.

I know when I have a fight coming up because they fill my water dish with this orange drink an hour or so before it starts. I was scared to try it at

first, but gave in from boredom. A good decision. It tastes sweet, like the fruit they give me... oranges... the peels aren't very good though.

More words. Words are nice. I like having words for things, even if I don't know where they come from. Cell. Keepers. Prods. Words help me make sense of my world.

Monster. That is a word. It describes me. Obaddion in particular.

OH-BAD-EEE-UN

Sometimes:

OH-BAD-DIE-ON

What an odd name. Doesn't mean anything... nothing except me. I am Obaddion, and Obaddion means... me. A wizard said that in regards to himself on the television.

Regards. I'm getting fancy.

Atrox means something... in another... language... cruel.

Fitting.

Languages. Mine is in my thoughts... and generally different from the one my keepers speak. Sometimes I understand their words... usually names. They always announce the monster's name before it comes out.

I have fought other monsters since my first fight with Atrox. Luckily, none of them disemboweled me. But I'm not sure I like fighting.

Great Ophio.

My second opponent. It was black as night, smooth as glass, and slippery as grease. Sixty feet of angry muscle with a pale mouth full of teeth on the front end. It had tiny eyes and tiny legs and red gills shaped like feathers and thrashed about in a fit of blind rage.

I counted each bite. Twenty-four. What's funnier than twenty-four? Twenty-five!

I suppose I'm not very good at jokes, even the ones I steal from cartoons.

Anyways, I finally managed to grab it and ripped off the head.

The humans cheered. They laughed when I tried to eat it and threw up. Great Ophio did not taste very good.

Maybe it was bad to kill it. Maybe I did the wrong thing.

But the people wanted me to... they liked it... and I got some fish afterwards.

My keepers were happy. No prods.

A good thing.

Still...

Third was a giant, scaly pig with sharp teeth and tusks that curved like crescent moons.

They called it Porky.

Porky was not very nice.

It came into the arena on an elevator platform, fast asleep. They shot darts into its back to wake it up... and make it angry.

To reiterate, Porky was not very nice.

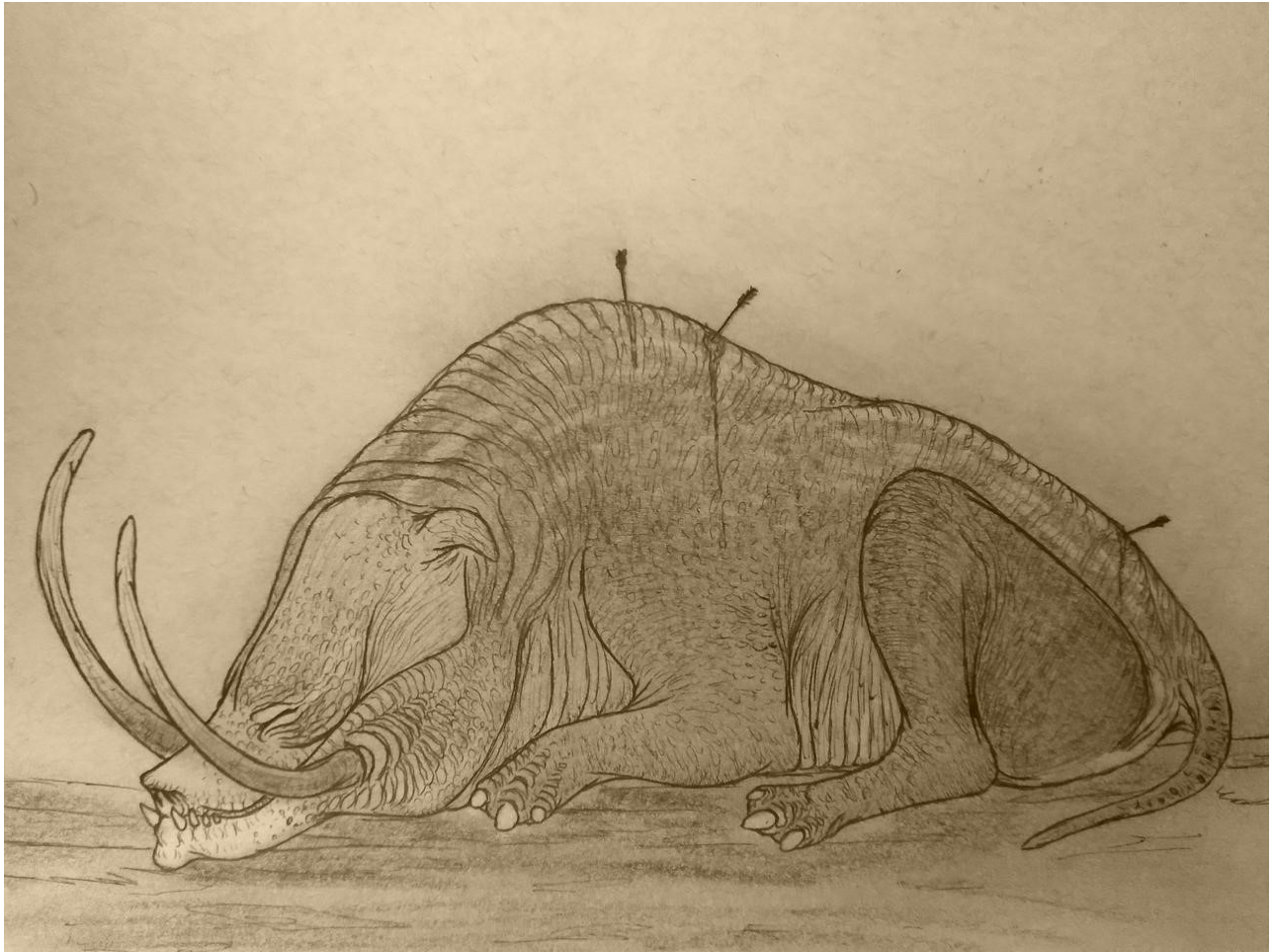
It drove its tusks through my thigh and my cheek. I could not walk for a week, not until my keepers decided to replace the muscles in my thigh. Still, I managed to defeat... kill... Porky. Just barely. I collapsed afterwards, too tired to try eating.

The fourth fight came not too long after. I lost. Badly.

My opponent had a body like a T-rex with feet like an elephant and a head like Atrox.

The Glutton. I do not like the Glutton.

#



“Obaddion!”, screams a voice, and I wake up and look to the television.

There is me.

Not me.

But in my image.

It moves weird and looks weird... like a toy.

A man in a suit.

A suit that looks like me.

He... Obaddion... walks onto a set of model buildings and starts stomping on them. There's music in the background, the dated kind that has a jazzy air to it. I'm getting good with words.

Another monster shows up. Atrox.

We start fighting.

In the show, Atrox can do some kind of supersonic roar. I can shoot fire from the pores in my sail. Fire and steam. The fight is a tie.

Unlike real life, there is no blood.

Here comes a robot. It is red and yellow and white and carries a giant sword.

Me... well, not me, but you know... and Atrox shake hands.

I would never shake Atrox's hand in real life.

Then we fight the robot. The show cuts to humans from time to time, human characters who cheer for the robot and guide the pilot.

"Target Obaddion's thermal exhaust points!", one says.

"Use your weaponized sound waves to jam Atrox's sonar", commands another.

Eventually the robot wins.

I explode. Atrox falls into the sea.

Everyone is happy, because the robot won, and the monsters lost.

Monsters.

Monster.

That is what I am.

An enemy. An antagonist.

It is not a good thing to be a monster. I am sorry.

#

There are ten seasons of "Go! Obaddion!" with twenty-six episodes each.

That is my show. It is an old show. There are other monsters and big robots, portrayed by men in rubber suits.

Mostly there are human characters who talk and plot to defeat me, usually me, and often Atrox. In the show me and Atrox are enemies but team up to fight other monsters and big robots. In the season ten finale we fought an invasion of skeletal space whales.

But we are not good guys.

We are monsters.

I am the main bad guy. In the show I smash cities and hurt people.

But I never did any of those things. I don't want to either.

I hope they don't really think I'm evil.

#

Purpose.

What is mine?

Something I like?

Art. I make art. I enjoy it too.

When the humans clean my cell they wipe it away.

They do not like my art. It has no use. It is only for me.

Sleeping is not a purpose either. Same goes for eating. They are simply things I must do.

Fighting.

People cheer when I fight and win.

When I lose they leave me alone in the cell for a few weeks after taking me apart and putting me back together. I do not like being alone... I don't want to be abandoned.

They have me here for a reason... everything has reasoning behind it... everything is intertwined in some way. Humans keep me here because they want me to fight. That must be my purpose. They want me to fight... and win.

That is what monsters do after all. Fight. Sometimes they die... sometimes they lose.

Good monsters win, unless they're fighting the good guys. Giant robots. Good monsters are strong and don't get disemboweled in front of a live audience.

So I must fight. That is my purpose. And to be useful... worth something... I must win.

Without that I am nothing.

But I don't like fighting.

But I don't like the prods even more... and they bring out the prods if I don't go out to fight. I'm scared of them. Still, fighting hurts...

Life can't be all napping and eating though.

If I just made art and slept and swam and did all the things I did in the woods, I would be worthless. I am a monster, and monsters must fight.

#

This time, I am not alone when the gate opens. There are keepers armed with prods.

Last time, I did not voluntarily go out to fight. They had to force me. I suppose they expect me to act the same. But I'll go out willingly, because I must.

#

Sun and moon abandoned. The stones weep for they are gone.

Where is the amber veil upon the trees?

I hardly hope for light of day.

Here there are different stars, piercing white from world afar.

How and why I do not know.

Nor what awaits in the unnatural glow.

Obaddion did not really know how or why he came up with that, but he was fairly proud of himself for it all the same (the fancy words amused him), and it seemed an excellent way to describe those ugly, bright lights and their poor imitation of the daylight he so craved.

He glared at them from under a furrowed brow, lips pulled back in a slight grimace.

Voices.

Humans.

Now he saw them, all around. A veritable throng in the seats above, safe atop their walls as they looked at him, roaring with a million terrible voices that reached down into his very soul and made it ache. Was it hatred? Or perhaps longing. He did not know.

Humans were humans and he was Obaddion, not entirely sure he hated them but not sure he loved them either.

Names aside he was scared at the vast multitude as they surrounded him, lofty in their apparent comfort as he looked this way and that, head low, eyes big and wondering. Odd was his fearful gaze, so out of place upon a hideous body expected to be purely an orchestrator of violence and nothing else.

Why he had been led there, he could only guess.

Probably another fight. He had prepared himself for one.

Obaddion was tired of not knowing, of confusion. As his mind grew he was beginning to realize that he liked to understand things and have words for what he experienced, and when he did not it was annoying at best and frustrating at worst. In that sense each day was better, for more knowledge came to his mind. He supposed that in many years' time he would become incredibly wise if ideas and words kept coming at the rate they did, but now his mind was young and confused, too past an animal state to be in bliss but not intelligent enough to truly understand.

The wall opposite from him began to move, opening like a mouth, and out barreled the Glutton in a writhing mass of fury that snapped its restraints and roared to the adoration of the crowd that had come to see it. Music began playing, as if on cue for the beast's arrival.

Oh dear.

Now the voices were louder, cheering with excitement as the newcomer charged towards him, feet thudding as the great jaws snapped up and down. He was caught up in the shock of it all and had very little time to react before the monster swung its great bony head at his flanks and knocked him against the wall.

Obaddion snorted with pain and landed a messy kick on the Glutton's face, righting himself as the monster stumbled backwards. Again roared the voices, and the music got louder. What they said he could not tell, it

was different than the words he knew. But, fear and rage and the madness of it all aside, the song had a good tune to it.

He could not help but feel a bit invigorated from the music and the juice he had drank earlier, and as the Glutton moved in to finish what it had started he slammed into its flanks, driving the spines of his left shoulder into its rubbery hide. The monster screamed and jerked loose, flailing wildly with sudden agony, and Obaddion was hit with an odd twinge of pity. His eyes widened at its suffering, but only from a moment before the Glutton's muscular tail smacked into his face and knocked him over.

The beast was upon him now, multiple rows of teeth glistening in the bright lights. Obaddion managed a scream before they came down upon, digging into the loose, wrinkly flesh of his neck and bashing him against the floor, bony beak firm on his skin. He could feel blood running along his scales, weaving past warts and scars like rivers do with mountains.

Desperate now, he began clawing at the Glutton, feet kicking at the neck and torso, hands scrabbling to dig into the eyes. They succeeded, at least one did, and he felt a sickening pop as the claw pierced the bulging white of the beast's eye and sunk in deep. He ripped it loose in a spurt of blood, splattering against the dusty floor. Unfortunately, this only enraged the Glutton into biting down even harder, returning injury with injury. Obaddion felt the teeth in his flesh, sinking ever deeper as the creature's vice-grip jaws crushed the life out of him.

The crowds cheered ever louder.

They liked it, he realized, tearing at the skin on the Glutton's throat until it bled.

They were enjoying the bloodshed.

Sadistic bastards.

He let loose an angry, choked scream and twisted his head enough to bite down on the Glutton's face, tusks denting the thick armor. The Glutton let out an odd cough and released him, stumbling back as it

struggled to lift up its head under his weight. Obaddion followed, clumsily struggling to his feet as he tried to work past the head and bite the neck. There was a terrible sense of shock and alarm as the beast wrenched free, tearing its head loose in fresh spray of blood, as if there needed to be more. Cheering met this gruesome spectacle as the two opponents locked jaws, biting each other's faces with enraged savagery.

Obaddion was twisted and pushed this way and that, finding it hard to try and resist his opponent but forced to do so all the same. He was facing an angry mass of muscle and teeth, biting flesh and eager for blood. The other eye glared up at him, bulging out of its hardened socket with deranged savagery. The tiny black pupil met with his own, giving him an idea...

A blind Glutton, albeit still savage and full of bestial rage, was better than one that could see. Obaddion immediately began clawing at the face, trying to avoid a bite to the arms while searching for a way to that hideous, maddened eye. The beast twisted and turned, unmatched violence as it tried to land a bite on his throat. He pulled free just in time to avoid the fatal wound, left with a painful sting from where the Glutton had torn a chunk of skin loose.

Now he lunged, biting the side of his opponent's head and sinking a massive canine deep into its remaining eye. It popped, and the Glutton screamed and tore itself free, wrenching his tooth in the process. Both of them were groaning and bellowing in pain now, with Obaddion hunched over, exhausted and unable to stand tall. The Glutton was twisting and turning in a blind fit of rage, biting the air and its tail and everything its jaws touched and screaming when it bit itself, and again Obaddion pitied it. At the same time, he had more than his share of wounds, and it would not hurt him to kill the Glutton here and now.

That's what they wanted after all. He looked up at the crowd, more terrified of them in some ways than the opponent before him. He had started towards it, intent on biting the neck and finishing it off, when the

music changed. Another gate opened up, and out came three new monsters, alike to the Glutton but smaller with shorter heads. All three charged without hesitation, dodging past their larger cousin and surrounding him with a wall of snapping jaws and gleaming teeth. They were frustratingly fast, taking every and any opportunity to try and land a bite. Forgetting the painful injury he thwacked one with his tail, only to enter a fresh new wave of agony as the tip throbbed and stung. The pain enraged him, and he was upon the miniature Glutton in seconds, crushing its head under his foot.

There was a sickening crack, with the bony beak split in fragments, an almost comical googly-eye hanging loose, the tongue limp against the ground. One of the other mini-Gluttons let out an angry bark, only for Obaddion to turn and pounce on it, forcing it to the ground and mutilating it with his teeth. It screamed, but only for a short while before a loud crunch silenced the protest. He gripped the corpse in his jaws, muzzle bloodied, fallen enemy limp and marred by his teeth. Raising his head up, he greeted man in his bloodlust with an angry, frustrated stare.

Is this not enough?

He wished that he could speak more than ever before.

A terrible spike of pain hit the base of his tale, and Obaddion turned his head to glimpse a horrible visual as the great Glutton, bloody holes for eyes, gripped his tail with its upturned beak. Only for a moment, for as soon as it had tasted flesh the enraged beast began a violent assault. Lifting him up with a painful crack, it began slamming him against the ground, here and there and blood everywhere. He felt as if he were flying, almost, and every time his head was bashed against the hard ground he wished more and more that he could not feel at all. Blood drizzled from his mouth, running red through the air.

The last mini-Glutton took its chances to bite at his face, tugging on the tough skin and nipping his lips. It filled him with rage, a terrible, helpless rage at all that was happening and his inability to stop it. He had

decided he would die there, far from home in a bright, loud, scary place as the ugly pale apes cheered for his agony and hollered at his suffering. Something must have happened, though, for his eyes watched as the blind Glutton released him with a jolt, almost as if it had been shocked, and stumbled clumsily back towards the tunnel it had come from. The smaller one followed it, barking and grunting at its heels as the great gate closed behind them.

So much for blinding it.

Obaddion lay his head down and gave himself to sleep, hoping he would not awake.

#

He was disappointed when he did, lying on his side and staring weakly at the sky. It would have been there, but there was a roof, reminding him that he was still very much a prisoners for reasons not entirely known. Blood and spit had pooled on the ground by his face, slowly leaking from his open mouth. For a while he lay there, listening to the voices, no longer a crowd, eyes half-closed and unwilling to take in what they saw.

Everything hurt. His neck was raw and bloody, his mouth and throat throbbed and ached. His bones trembled with exhaustion, his body felt weak. He forced himself up off the ground all the same. It didn't feel safe to rest there.

He had been wrong. The cell was better.

Tail dragging on the concrete with just the painful tip raised above, Obaddion made his slow way down back past the open gate, through the very tunnel from which he had entered the arena, and back into his cell. He plopped down on the floor with an exhausted whimper, bones creaking like rotted trees as they lowered his aching form. The gate closed behind him, no doubt being controlled by his captors, and he was alone with his thoughts.

The water dish had been provided anew, but his mouth was raw with agony and to drink now would be incredibly painful. There was food too, kibble, but he ignored it.

Pain was a sensation anew, a fresh concept in his growing mind.

Of course Obaddion had fought and killed and taken life before, all so trivial in the game of survival. He had killed Great Ophio and Porky in the arena, and countless other creatures in order to feed himself. They had screamed, but he had been blind and deaf. It seemed now as if his eyes and ears had truly been opened.

Before when he was hurt it was unpleasant and best to be avoided, but he never thought of others as suffering alike to him, and he had never contemplated his own suffering. Now he did, and it was awful.

The Glutton had suffered too, and he had felt some odd sympathy for it, for it was a prisoner alike to him. He doubted the creature really felt the same, it seemed far too savage to think, but it could suffer nonetheless. It had screamed, after all, pained by the sudden blindness. He had screamed too, as those teeth sunk into his neck and tail, as his head was bashed against the floor. Never before had he experienced pain like that, not even when his tail had been ripped off, for now he could understand it and feel it so vividly, know that it meant he was fading away, helpless in his agony.

Obaddion felt a sudden stab of guilt, thinking of all those whom he slaughtered in hunts long since passed. The other monsters' screams and wails, the terrified cries of animals when he cornered them and bared his cruel teeth. Did they not suffer the same as he? Of course they did, and he was outraged at himself for being so blind to it, ignoring the agony of his prey. The things he had done were awful, perhaps man was simply punishing him for his cruelty.

Perhaps he deserved to cry and bleed in the arena, sit alone in his cell. After all, he was a monster.

He had begun to realize that was what monsters were: awful, horrible creatures who terrorized those they could and inflicted pain and suffering, abominations, aberrations. Himself.

There was a terrible, sickly feeling in his stomach, and his throat gurgled. He struggled back up to his feet, seeing if taking away the pressure on his stomach would relieve it. It did not, and again came a spike of fresh pain.

You deserve this. Think of what you did to them.

His jaws gaped and wheezed like a fish on dry land, there was a terrible retching and then out came the vomit, scarlet red and splattered upon the floor. He groaned and vomited again, hating himself, hating his situation, hating his prior ignorance as he thought of all those he had sent to the grave.

Again he vomited out blood, a red torrent from his maw, and the floor was slick with it, rejected life. Twice more, and he felt that it had been the last. With a weary groan he settled back down, laying on his side with his head in the blood. There was nowhere better to rest, no cave, no dark refuge.

Obaddion settled down and tried to sleep, kept awake by his thoughts, hating himself and the world. He knew now that there was blood on his hands, but was it truly for the better? He had been innocent before, more accurately ignorant, and it had been blissful. He was beginning to think that his newfound intelligence was a curse, that it would be better to return to that animal bliss. He missed the forest, the trees.

Thinking of bygone afternoons spent sitting in his cave, looking out on a rainy day as the pine trees swayed in the wind, he wondered why he was there and the way he was and why he couldn't just sit and enjoy the rain against the pines.

Chapter Three Do You Talk?

In days passed I walked under your shade, fervent romping in the untouched glade.

Long since I have been taken away, leaving the sounds of wind and rain.

Hollow stone is my abode, and now you are but bitter memories.

Leave me, stay with me. I do not know.

#

I miss the trees.

Of course they were familiar, and generally unremarkable. They were everywhere after all, even as old logs on the beach and sunken in the lakes.

I suppose it's the familiarity that makes me ache for them.

They were such constants, weathered pine trunks and oaks laden with moss, green in summer and dark spider-limbs in winter. But now I see none, only grey. Even the simplest parts of my past life have been taken from me.

But what past life?

Am I not the same Obaddion as before? My body is here, yet at times I feel it does not belong to me, as does my mind. I never thought of things then like I do now, each day something new comes to mind. Why did I never hear the screams before? Why didn't I know?

It's painful and frustrating, not knowing. I know the taste of meat (there is always guilt when I eat it now) and of water. I know the feel of the sun on my back, yet it has been so long since I last experienced it, and I fear I never will again. There is no sun here, only mockery of it. Ugly lights, I hate them and wonder why someone thought they were a good idea.

My paintings are fading away. I'm waiting to see if, the next time I get meat, it'll be bloody meat, and then I can redo the trees and river and my bear. What a funny bear. I saw one like that once, very fat, in the fall. It was gorging on fish, just as I. Then I gorged on it too. It was a good day when it happened, but now I just feel bad. As if I was someone different, another Obaddion entirely. Something's happened with my mind.

Thinking of it is scary, like thinking of creation itself. Why is there something and not nothing? Existence is a thing and it's maddening. I can explain why the gates open and why I need food, but not why I'm here.

Fighting, I guess, but not really.

I wonder if someone knows. If someone can tell me. It would be nice.

But I doubt they ever will. Try as I might I cannot talk. There are no others like me, and the people leave me here alone most of the time. Maybe it's for the best. We're too different, and besides, they scare me. Yet I feel a longing to join them all the same. That could easily just be a reflection of loneliness, wanting the companionship they have in each other but for myself with one who can understand me. There are words in my mind but they cannot come out, like new plants trying to grow under a log.

They've sent me out into the arena quite a few times now. Sometimes it's small monsters like the mini-Gluttons. Sometimes it's something else.

After my last fight with the Glutton I fought this huge, wrinkly beast built like an ape, but the head was bird-like with a thick, bony crest and beak-like jaws. White and hard as bone, no eyes. It made odd clicking noises near constantly, like whales (where have I seen those?), and had lots of teeth.

Big teeth.

You can guess what I was vomiting up after that one.

Another time there was a giant skink-looking thing with tiny little legs and dark, iridescent skin. It must have had some kind of venom,

because I swelled up wherever it bit me. By then I wasn't feeling very remorseful, so I snapped its jaws.

I don't like hurting them. It makes me think of how I feel when I'm hurt, and then I feel guilty. But the guilt fades away as soon as teeth sink into my flesh, or claws scrape my hide. They're the ones who attack me after all. Maybe it's something they're fed. Maybe the humans tell them to act that way. I really don't know, but it doesn't make sense for them to attack me. We could try and figure a way out, a way to escape, or at least talk. We're all monsters after all.

Then again, I've begun to realize that monsters don't talk, or think. Monsters fight and die.

At least that's what we're intended to do. I don't agree with it, honestly I don't really agree with anything now. This isn't my world, it's not for me. If it was, I wouldn't be bleeding for the amusement of others.

Speaking of, I'm sick and tired of this weird game show music they play every time. It's out of place with the gory imagery of creatures ripping each other apart. Maybe people appreciate the contrast. Wouldn't be too far-fetched considering they enjoying watching monsters fight each other in the first place.

Sometimes it's like I'm just a big joke to them. They hoot and laugh and cheer but if they were the ones down there they'd be screaming like I do. Maybe they don't understand when I suffer, like I once did. Perhaps my emotions, so vivid to me, are vague to them. Or maybe they just don't care. They definitely didn't care when I blinded Glutton, or tore Great Ophio's head off. If anything they liked it, as when Glutton used me as a chew toy. Complete with realistic sound effects.

You don't really understand things until you experience them. You can know the ocean is cold, but you don't really know what it's like until you swim in it. People need a taste of the violence they so adore. Maybe then they'd enjoy watching monsters hug and dance to their annoying

game show music. I'd take dancing over getting bitten on the face any time, and I hate dancing.

The other day (that's another thing I never really paid attention to until I woke up in this cell), they had me fight this robot named Plane Panther.

I don't know what the heck this thing had to do with planes and panthers, because it looked like a metal person with a goofy car-grill grin on its face. I'd never seen a robot in person up until I met this thing, but a few subsequent nights of 90's mecha anime (I guest-starred in one of them) tell me that they can look, well, actually impressive. This guy on the other hand was silver and red and yellow and blue and gave a thumbs up when he first walked out. I almost burst out laughing until it punched me in the face and knocked out a tooth. Then it wasn't funny anymore. Just humiliating.

Long story short I got absolutely bodied by the Plane Panther (complete with 70's jazz music playing in the background) and then took a nap to sleep away the shame.

Might as well call me a "caboose cheetah", or "train tiger".

Seriously, who comes up with these names?

I've found life is generally mediocre at best and terrible at worst. Unless you're a human, and you can sit up on your nice chairs and watch Plane Panther vibe to his theme song while punching the Syphilis-Spinosaurus in the face.

Of course I'm not a human, I'm a monster, and monsters fight and die and when they're not doing that they sit in their concrete cells and stare at the wall.

Everything has a purpose. Even worms.

They eat poop.

So having one doesn't really justify existence, because they're generally mediocre. Mine is to, well, you already know. And I hate it.

Winning isn't fun, it's just relieving. I know I can be done and go back to sleep, the only thing that I can really do to occupy the time. Win or lose, everything still hurts.

But when I lose, it's like dying a little. They don't just pin me to the ground or stick to a set of rules. They try to kill me, and if I can't best them at that I get beaten so badly that I can barely move for the next week. Crawl back to my cell because even a boring little cube is better than lying bloody on the dust while hundreds of voices mock me with a collective barrage of cheers and laughs.

Even if they don't laugh... I know they're judging me inside...

...weak...

...failure...

...hideous.

It hurts on a deeper level too, seeing as it seems that fighting is my purpose. I can't even do that right.

Why is it that my pain amuses you so?

What have I done? Why am I the bad guy, so in need of defeat?

The monsters are outside the glass, not within. They just don't know it.

Every fight I die and rise again, vomiting my failures. Out comes the blood, staining the floors and making them stink. I lay in it because there is nowhere else to go. Then I stink and rot.

It's getting hotter every day, and I miss the cold. Now I sit and sweat, and the flies breed in my wounds. I can feel their children in there, maggots burrowing under my scabs. Sometimes I try and scrape them out, but it hurts even more.

I am being eaten alive.

No one cares. If they really cared they'd do something. If they were pretending to care they'd say they felt bad for me. But neither has happened, because it doesn't matter. I'm the monster after all. Not prince charming. But I bet if I had flowing hair and a nice chin instead of quills

and teeth growing on my lips I'd be the best prince charming around. You know I would, with my obvious charm and heroism.

Sometimes they clean up my poop and wipe the blood and urine off the floors, which is nice. I crap a lot, if not for the cleaning I would be burrowing in it right now. The maggots would like that.

Of course, while one cleans, there's a few others with those awful prods. I huddle against the back wall and lay down, trying my best to look non-threatening. Because I'm not, really. I just want to be left alone, and the prods hurt too bad. There's no getting past them. But they poke me anyway, and I scream, and they enjoy the screams.

Come at me bare-handed, or with a normal prod that doesn't shock the scales off my ugly skin. Then we'll see who's laughing.

I hate them.

Rage is becoming a bigger fish in the sea of my mind. A great big whale (I want to see one so badly). I hate other monsters, I hate people. Even if the other monsters are monsters, they're not Obaddions. To my knowledge there are no Obaddions but me. I am alone. There is love but I haven't really seen it. Happiness yes, but not for me. Plane Panther has a goofy smile all the time. Maybe it's because it has its own theme song. Maybe I need a theme song.

When I lived in the forest I could topple trees and excavate a massive cave in the stony earth with my bare hands. Even now, with aching bones and scabbed skin, I can rip and tear the flesh of my psychotic friends in the arena. Yet I feel weak.

How do you keep going? Every day is the same. Sleep and drink and eat and scratch my scabs and try and pee in my empty water dish so I don't have to sleep on it. Sometimes my feces are bloody, sometimes not. It hurts either way. Everything hurts.

Maybe it's the little things. The times I get that orange drink, even if it means I have to fight soon after. The times I get meat and not brown blocks of dirt pretending they're food. It gives you enough happiness,

enough satisfaction, to sit through the lonely days in your cell and wait for the chute to drop meat again. Or, if you're lucky, fish. I have other interests but food is pretty high up on the list. I'm always hungry after all. I need more. Sometimes I can feel my body eating itself, working away at hard-earned muscle and bones just to last a little longer. No wonder I feel old. The maggots know this, I'm basically a corpse to them.

So, anyways, it's the little things that keep you living. Working away at a life that's so utterly devoid of thoughtful purpose and joy. Something must have made me. They say it's the universe, but the universe is just the universe. It doesn't have a brain. That's like saying the shit made the flies. But everyone knows that the shit's just there and the flies live in it. It's their universe.

I make one twice a day.

I need a creator, as paper needs an artist. Someone who cared enough to make me, someone who enjoys my design like I do my bloody little paintings on the wall. Someone who sees beyond the monster, who can see my thoughts and know who I am.

Maybe I'm just here to fight and die. Maybe I am man-made for purposeful suffering.

I don't want to be a mistake. I don't want to exist just because, like shits and flies. I don't want my purpose to be for fighting and dying. I want to be free, to ascend. There has to be a way out, but it's beyond me.

Worlds as I know them are relative. I am a world unto flies and maggots, the cell and arena are their cosmos. For years the forest and the lakes and swamps and the ocean, they were my world. My food is a world to the tiny things that live on it, bacteria and parasites and things beyond my ugly googly-eyes. With that perspective I both make and eat worlds, while living on one all the same.

But worlds all die eventually. Meat rots, plants wither. I trudge on now, living for the little things, islands amidst a dark sea. I hope for them like the trees hope for spring and its light and rain.

What happens when the hope runs out?

#

“Obaddion Version 1954... hmm”.

“What about it?”.

“I just don’t like it. There’s something off about it... him. The way it moves... the way its eyes move. When I look into those eyes they look back. Like it’s thinking, Like it’s a person”.

“The eyes are supposed to be like that. They make it creepier”.

“But it’s not just that... I can’t describe it well but something’s off about it. It doesn’t seem as in-tune with itself as the others... like it knows its body isn’t really its body. The little things, the way it moves, the way it acts... I’m not sure it’s just part of the programming. I’ve worked with dozens of Obaddion units, they’re always more animalistic. But this one, I don’t think the procedure on this one was done right... I think they left part of it behind... a part that shouldn’t be there...”.

“Don’t be absurd. You sound like my old classmate, telling me she was part wildcat or something”.

“Didn’t you notice the way its quills grew after the procedure? The way its eyes shifted... its face. It looks you in the eye... the others don’t. Its teeth got blunt, and not from the food it eats. Scans show its own body literally digested the sharp tips, trying to make its molars more like human ones. The quills on its arms and tail fell off after it got here, it only kept the ones on its head...”.

“Probably because it sleeps in its own shit. Really, this job’s creepy enough without you trying to get me to believe that this thing is intelligent, that it’s mutating into something weird. The procedure gives them fighting ability, some fun moves and nothing more. Everything else it cut out. Everything”.

“The quills... they’re only on its head. Its... his... brain rejected them elsewhere... because it’s trying to grow its body the way it thinks it should

be... the way its old body was. The quills... they're its attempt to grow hair...".

#

Hello fishies.

Obaddion studied them through the glass, pressing his malformed face against the clear surface, tiny black pupil staring with a bored sort of observation.

He could see himself as a ghost, his faint reflection looking back.

Look at that lovely smile, he thought, giving a great big pumpkin grin.

The fishies didn't smile back. If anything they looked appalled. People didn't really like him. Of course they cheered when he fought monsters, win or loss. But that was for the bloodshed. They didn't care for *him*. Then again, he had seen a kid with a plastic action figure made in his likeness. In a way it made him feel good, even if the action figure looked like an iguana on ketamine.

There were a few of them, a couple in black suits and the rest in lab coats. They stared at him and talked and though he knew words he could not understand a single one they said. Weren't there many different kinds of words after all? Languages they were called.

Parler en Français?

Shoot, now he wanted a baguette. Whatever that was.

The humans always just stood and stared at him or wrote on papers or typed on those flat things that glowed with ugly artificial light on one side. There was a door behind them, from which they would come in and out of into the little room to watch him.

Honestly, he couldn't understand why they'd want to watch him sit and sleep and occasionally get up to relieve himself, but he supposed that they wanted to keep track of their charges. It made sense that they would have some way of watching him, seeing as there were no visible cameras in his cell. Visible. One was probably hidden, somewhere.

A good thing was that whenever the humans came they left the TV on for him.

It would flicker on with odd mechanical sounds and a burst of light, and then any number of shows played. Many were just people talking, which Obaddion found boring and rarely understood (they generally sounded like the people in the arena, not his own words). Some others had monsters like himself, but were still mostly just people talking, despite being monster movies.

They were obviously self-obsessed creatures.

Still, he liked the monster flicks. Sad as they were, they at least gave him insight as to what people thought of him and what was expected of monsters and why they liked watching them fight. Most of the monster movies involved multiple creatures fighting at the end against a backdrop of buildings and explosions and more explosions. Sometimes it was obviously a couple of sweaty guys in rubber suits, like with his own show (which played frequently), which he found rather amusing. Other times it seemed almost real, with only the slightest indication it was not, and Obaddion wondered as to how they had even made it so, watching wide-eyed and curious.

Yet he could not help but notice that the monsters always, well, fought and died. They roared and shrieked and smashed buildings and make a great spectacle of themselves. Whether it was the flying turtle or the nuclear dinosaur or the giant ape, there was never really any character, any emotion. That was reserved for the people and their forced romances and arsenals of bizarre weaponry. One in particular resembled Plane Panther and would have been very amusing to watch if the sight of it didn't remind him of the painful aching in his jaws. At least it was friends with the nuke lizard and had a cool theme song.

Obaddion had come to realize that there were dozens of shows with the nuclear dinosaur and that people had probably been making them since the dawn of time and were constantly perfecting their craft. The old ones

had better music though, and despite his general disliking of the man-made he could not help but get up and dance (odd stamping and shuffling) as well as he could. Then he would get hot and sweaty and the flies would swarm in annoyance, circling his face until he lay back down and resumed his rest. They would hole up in the pores on his sail, crawling on the soft inner skin and feeding on sweat, and he was helpless to stop them.

No matter one's strength and power, the flies would eat them all the same.

When would this nightmare ever end?

They were playing another one of those really annoying cartoons. Actually, there was one show he liked where a sentient kitchen sponge worked as a fry cook and harassed everyone with his childlike oblivion. Whoever made that was a genius. But the show on now was a bunch of annoying people with pointy hair taking part in violent dog-fighting with electric rats. Probably the same sort of people who put him in this cell and like watching him fight other monsters. Or maybe some other sort of weirdos.

Either way it was annoying, so he turned his head away from the screen and closed his eyes. Some sleep would do him good.

#

Getting... smarter.

I think more and clearer.

Black turns to blue during sleepy hours... my cell drapes in maple with the awakening of dawn. Sometimes I look out the window. Colors are nice.

Night spawns the perfect ways to be alone... even if it's still hot. The flies never tire. I swat them during the day... fly-hunting is one of my only pastimes... thankfully my body produces a never-ending supply.

Green fields and tan fields... dusty with weeds... climbing the rock piles and searching drainage pools for frogs. I wasn't scared of people... not as much.

Fragments of something so... familiar.
 Is this the life I was supposed to have?
 Pieces of other versions of myself?
 Glimpses of what's coming after this torture?
 In those moments I felt at home.

With the amber of the setting sun I feel hope... joy... and with the memories comes truth. I think they're mine... as much of me as this body... as my name.

The TV switches from an animated superheroine team's twenty-minute makeup session to my show... words I don't know and then "Obaddion!". The voice shouts it excitedly, cutting to a fast-paced intro showing highlights from the series.

Being rather sleepy, I don't care to watch.

Yet.

I might if a new monster shows up. Last week it was a space chicken with hooks for hands and a buzzsaw for a chest, and the week before it was a metal copy of myself made out of something called space titanium.

Terror of Mecha-Obaddion. There was lots of jazz.

Back to the memories. They're good, and mine.

An older time, fossils from a bygone age.

Juxtaposing those frames and this reality is inspiring impatience.

Also hope. I'm already prepared for what comes... next... when they don't want to put my organs back... but I want a chance at belonging.

Monster.

I belong in the cell, in the arena, because monsters kill and destroy.

Belonging.

Perhaps only in those dated memories.

#

Days passed and turned to weeks and the weeks into more weeks. Obaddion had stopped keeping track of his time there in the cell, assuming

that his captors would work him until he died. There was no going back to the woods now.

At least he could stare at the television as long as it was something fairly interesting and not one of the more overly revolting aspects of human culture. He had been getting a little more food too, generally just that bitter kibble but even bitter kibble was better than his aching bones slowly wasting away. He ate whatever he was given, despite the pains in his throat, and tried to keep it down. That was hard. After fighting he never felt much like food, only sleep, especially when his opponent had been biting down on his neck and throat and face and leaving it raw and bloody.

The warm months had passed in all their sweaty unpleasantness, and again it was cold. Obaddon's cell was a little warmer than outside, as he could tell when he cared to peak through the tiny window and glimpse the frost on the rooftops of buildings. At times it snowed, and he desperately wanted to be back in the forest and play in the snow. He had memories of rolling around in it, following the footprints of other animals, sniffing the icicles that grew along the banks of the rivers.

He had been standing on his toes, watching the snow fall through his little window (it seemed to snow a lot more there than it did back in the woods), when the little metal door opened.

Obaddon had tensed up, as always, huddling against the far corner as his cleanup crew walked in. At once he felt a twinge of fear, hatred, and... envy? As always, he drew back from the cruel prods.

One of them had watermelons, three of them stuffed in a big pillow case. As he watched, the man dumped them out on the floor. The others finished cleaning, and then they left.

He recognized the man. Months ago, the man had given him watermelons and fish and other good things.

It's been a long time.

He had forgotten about the man and being given good food. An odd thing to forget about. But his mind had been dull when it all happened.

Obaddion was used to being fed kibble by the chute, but this? This was odd.

Still, it was food. He had crunched up and swallowed the first one (oh, it was delicious!) when the window-wall slid back and he saw them there, watching him. He paused for a bit, and then kept eating. Maybe they had put poison in the watermelons and were waiting for him to die. Oh well. They tasted too delicious to be ignored.

Then, they were gone, both watermelons and people, and Obaddion sat down and stared at the wall. He waited. No, they weren't poisoned. He was fine.

But why had they done it?

Perhaps it was a distraction, so they could work without fear of him aggressing them. Perhaps they just wanted to watch him eat. Or maybe, just maybe, it was purely an act of kindness...

Kindness.

Had he been shown it before, in the prods, the arena, the cell? Could people even be kind? They could, of course, be kind to other people, he had seen it on the television. But to him?

Obaddion sat and thought about it deeply.

#

A dream.

He was on a suspension bridge. It was a nice, sunny day with blue skies and clouds that seemed to sail on the gentle breeze.

He looked down at the depths and contemplated them like he had that cliff by the beach all those years ago.

Lonely. And homesick.

On either side of the bridge was a rippling blue expanse dotted with islands of green, pine trees and houses owned by those fortunate enough to afford it.

He looked up at the skies one last time and took a leap.

#

Obaddion awoke with a jolt and did not manage to fall back asleep.

#

Weeks passed, and it grew colder. He was given more watermelons (sometimes, while he ate, they videotaped him with their odd glowing screens, which he remembered were called “phones”, through the glass) and, once, a bag of apples. They were delicious, and he grew to like the man who fed him.

He had liked him before, but his simpler mind of months prior caused him to forget.

The man had been kind before too.

How odd, that the creatures who mistreated him so could also show such kindness. Mostly to eachother, yes, but the man had gone out of his way to give him fruit and sometimes meat. Of course, Obaddion didn't really know his intentions, if anything this observation of kindness was merely a yearning for it. If they truly cared, they would set him free.

Nonetheless, they were delicious watermelons.

Aside from that, it was mostly sitting, sleeping, drinking, and staring at the wall or the television. After fights he was tired, and angry. There was nothing to lash out against, nothing to break, nothing to destroy in his rage. Only impenetrable concrete, cold stone and hard floors. Sometimes he hit his head against them, hoping ever so slightly it would return him back to his past self, the mind he had in the forest.

#

“Puppies, kittens, and rainbows! The power of love!”, cheers a childish voice on the TV.

Dear God, the television can be annoying sometimes.

God.

Creator.

Memories tell me some things, the television others. Without them my world would be concrete, food, and pain. It's nice to have a bit of entertainment media.

According to some, God made people and the earth and apparently he loves it all.

Love.

God also made blood and pain and the maggots in my skin. Maybe he made me too.

I am not sure God loves me.

Morals. They're supposed to keep people in check... to keep them from doing things like hitting me in the face with electric prods. It seems morals don't apply when it's a hideous monster and not a fellow person.

There are many rules. Most make sense. Don't steal, don't kill, etc...

Apparently you can't end it all either.

Sometimes I think about it. I'm disturbed that I do... like when I think angry thoughts... but they're there... a part of me. I can't erase them, only bury them and hope that they don't wake up.

More and more I hurt. There's nice things, but I don't take the pain as well as I used to.

The arena. A place of suffering. People cheer for it.

I've killed twenty-four other monsters as of today.

What's funnier than twenty-four? Twenty-five!

Shoot, I think I've made that joke before.

I killed things... and they cheered. They wanted me to. They liked it.

I'm unwanted unless I kill and destroy because that's all monsters are good for.

You just tell yourself that.

Because it's true. Nobody accepts me... my art... what I love... that I feel pain and... loneliness... just like them. I'm only good to them if I fight.

That's why I fight.

It justifies my existence.

It makes me useful. It makes me worth something.

Before I fought in the arena, I was nothing, and if I don't do well...
...I'm worthless.

#

Started painting again, even if it doesn't matter. They gave me a live chicken, because humans enjoy watching me take another life. Poor chicken.

Still, food is food. I killed it quickly and plucked the feathers so I could play with them later. With the blood I painted a peacock. They are beautiful birds.

I'm improving. Sometimes on the TV there's commercials for pencils and paints and other art things. I used what was left of the blood to make a red crayon, as a helpful hint.

My keepers laughed and probably thought it was a turd.

#

All the other monsters Obaddion had encountered so far were savage beasts, raging and brutish without any sign that they thought alike to him. It was frustrating, to know he was considered alike to these creatures. Violent and bestial, without thought or reason. Perhaps his caretakers had seen his paintings though, primitive as they were. Perhaps they knew...

Of course they did.

Just the other day they laughed at them.

Obaddion decided that the next time he got a pig (which probably wouldn't happen in a long time, or maybe not at all) or the orange drink, he would try and put his words into physical writing on the wall opposite from the glass window. Or maybe pictures. Pictures would be easier, as he could only picture the appearance of a few very simple words. Most were merely sounds to him, without a visual form, and try as he might he could not think of how those forms would look. Thinking could be very frustrating when one was without a means to convey their thoughts.

Words.

He'd never written before.

It would be hard. But sometimes he recognized words on the TV, and with the help of memories, he could try.

What would he write?

#

The opportunity came sooner than expected.

Obaddion awoke the next morning to the sound of his monolithic cell door closing.

His keepers had left a new water dish with orange drink.

All the old ones, which he had urinated in or chewed up, had been taken away by the maintenance workers, and he could wholeheartedly agree with it as he had gone through many. He had found, though, that when he chewed on them it annoyed them and they often shocked him for it when they found a fresh dish all torn up. So forth he tried to put the dish neatly beside the door when it was empty so they wouldn't have to walk far into the cell. Not because he cared for their convenience, but because he really didn't like getting shocked.

Now was the time for him to convey his "great artistry", and, dipping his hand in the juice, he began to splatter it on the wall in a very crude semblance of a couple words and, not knowing how to write the final word, a picture. The message was simple:



Obaddion figured that a simple message was the best way to go and if they didn't understand the words at least they'd recognize the picture.

He was really craving fish right about then.

He admired his work for a bit, seeing as this was the first time he had actually written words and not just thought them, and though it was messy it was at least a start. With a wheeze he turned and guzzled down his drink, set it back down by the door, and waited. After a while there was the familiar grinding of the gate-wall, and his cell opened up into the dreaded passageway that led to his place of suffering.

Keepers came, armed with prods and guns.

Guns. To kill if he didn't obey.

Obaddion briefly contemplated attacking them, forcing them to pull the trigger and end him once and for all, but shook the thought off. He had to try.

#

They didn't notice my message.

I don't need your "guidance"... I'll go to the arena on my own. It's all I have.

Enemy.

Other monsters are always the enemy. Especially Atrox.

Today my enemy resembles a gigantic *Archaeopteryx*.

I come out roaring in the name of entertainment to a cheering crowd.

#

Raw, and painful.

Fighting hurts.

I won. It is good for my pride. But I don't like fighting. Especially when my opponent tears pieces of my skin off and bites my face.

I look into my dish and see myself. Black... wrinkled... a bedraggled beast of predesigned stage wars. The cherry red is gone, peeled away like sunburnt skin. My face is the color and consistency of scabs. It hurts.

I don't like it... I'm so nervous... terrified... when I get the orange drink. It means blood... pain... the mocking of a sadistic crowd. But they don't want me unless I can fight... when I get hurt, they put me back together and leave me in the cell. Alone. If I can't fight, I am nothing to them. So I must... I must show that I am strong... stronger than the other monsters, or they'll throw me away like trash.

If I don't walk out there when they want me to... I'll be abandoned.

Hopefully they see my message.

I really want more fish.

#

The TV turns on, there's the flying turtle fighting an alien with a knife for a head, but entertainment is a petty pastime to me now. It can't erase the pain, or my loneliness, but still... it's better than staring at the wall.

The door opens and people walk in.

Instantly, I think of watermelons.

I haven't gotten any lately. Most days they feed me the blocks of brown kibble.

There's the usual guys in suits and lab coats. They're arguing with loud voices and vehement gestures. Just like their relatives the chimps, humans are loud and smelly and make odd noises. Perhaps my silence

(unless I'm in a fight, in which case I can't be blamed for screaming in pain) is a gift.

One of them turns from the others and goes up to the glass.

Hello fishy.

I stare at him, not bothering to get up from the ground. The others are gesturing to the paintings and the faded message from the other day and barking back and forth. Meanwhile the TV's blaring the flying turtle's theme song, which I don't understand a word of.

Then the one by the glass speaks, and I understand him.

"Do you talk?"

Heck no.

But I can think. And write. Isn't that enough?

Again he asks the same question, but louder.

"Do you talk!?"

Shut up already. I'm trying to watch the guy in a rubber turtle suit pretend to fly.

A third time he repeats the question. The others are silent, almost as if they're waiting for an answer too. Do they seriously think I can?

It's not too far-fetched now that I think about it.

I can write words and hear words and think words. Maybe I can say them too, if I try. I haven't tried yet after all. I open my mouth and try to say "yes". Out comes a hoarse wheeze. I try again to no avail.

The man who asked the question begins to laugh as I open and close and manage nothing more than wheezes. It's fucking humiliating. The others start arguing again, and they watch me a bit before leaving.

Once again, I am by myself.

Now the turtle movie is over and they're playing a show where a man plays the drums and sings about boats and hoes.

Time to stare at the wall.

Satisfaction with who I am and what I've accomplished doesn't come often, nor can I cultivate it all on my own. As much as I hate fighting, I have to admit I like the cheers, my little theme song that plays if I win...

Still... is it worth it?

Hard work only seems to leave torn tendons and cracked bones.

Pride is suffocated once it's sniffed out by the beasts who claim to love me.

Expectations are heightened when someone's reputation is on the line.

Expectations allude my sense of reason, as well as my will to live.

Every time I begin to care about myself... to develop a bit of hope... a bit of confidence... that monument of appreciation one strives to build is decimated like the biblical Tower of Babel.

God wanted his toys to know their place... just as my keepers wanted me to know mine.

Do you talk?

I am not sentient in their eyes... not equal... just a pet... a toy.

Fuck them. I can't stop them... only hate... them... and myself for being powerless.

What a cruel chain of events.

However, it has taught me that control is an illusion.

Such a beautifully agonizing lesson.

Chapter Four

Terror of Mecha-Obaddion

My face is red like the setting Sun, like crisp leaves in fall. I used to sniff them looking for the worms and nuts underneath. My body is jet black, my stomach cream. That is part of what makes me Obaddion... my colors... unique... not mud-brown like the Glutton or pale like Atrox... my colors... mine... something to take pride in.

I am a monster, yes, but a decent-looking one. I am me and I alone bear the title “Obaddion”. That is good. I am happy in that respect.

Another fight today. What remains is torn lips and a jagged scar that runs down my flank like a winding river, courtesy of my opponent, a monstrously fat frog with two fangs on its lower jaw. It was simply introduced as “Frog”. Everyone laughed. I did too, and they laughed when I laughed. I’m not sure whether it was because I cannot laugh like they can, or that they just found a human-like expression on a monster amusing.

Frog lunged at my face and tried to swallow me whole, cutting my side with its teeth in the process, so I tore open its stomach. Was it a good thing? No... of course not... but I had to. Besides, they gave me a fish after... it was delicious.

I love fish.

But I do not love fighting.

Still, I’ve learned that life cannot be all enjoyable things. Even if that hurts. I was getting worse for a while... angry... hopeless... but I feel better. They’ve been feeding me better lately, so maybe I was just... hungry?

Pirates pull crazy stunts on the television and drink rum. I would like to try rum. It sounds good.

But for now I simply watch them drink it on the television, fighting Krakens and undead pirate crews. The captain steals a cursed octopus-pirate's heart and hides it in a jar of dirt. I laugh... and then start craving seafood.

That's the thing about television. Fantasy worlds are nice... but they're never really there... never really interactable. You look into them but you can't be a part of them... just as the dreams I have of falling off that bridge don't result in death, or as the dreams of fish don't end with me waking up and getting fish. Perhaps it would be better to never know such worlds even existed, for exist they do... on screens... in minds... and even if they aren't there they make you want things you could never have. I would love my kibble if I never tasted meat... fruit... be less bored if I never tasted freedom.

Freedom. I hear a great deal about it. Why can't I be free?

Because I'm a monster... because they think all I do is kill and destroy. I don't... I don't like it, and I only do it because I have to... because of what will happen if I don't. But all they see is the violence... my hideous face. They decided I was awful before I even met them... I know from watching TV... "Go! Obaddion!" was a thing before I came here... which means one of two things: there is another Obaddion out there who the show is based off of, or they were watching me in the woods and based the character off of me.

The vents click open... not the ventilation kind... the bad kind. The ones that let loose that gas that puts me asleep so they can cut me open... take some organs out... add others in. I always feel different after... sometimes better... sometimes worse, but never the same. Gas smells awful, like mushroom spores. It's grey in an ugly sort of way... unnatural.

Oh well... I was planning on napping... anyway.

#

"We're doing one last fight with 1954 before it's transferred up north".

“I saw the paper... they’re outfitting it with that experimental build. I’m not sure why they don’t just go with the original, it has remote piloting and everything”.

“They wanted a more animalistic flair. This’ll be Obaddion’s hardest fight yet”.

“And here it is. I like this one... it’s calmer than the rest in a quiet... thinking sort of way”.

“It’s a problem, one that’s cost a lot in repairs. Usually they come out roaring right away. This thing looked at Atrox like it was... I dare say confused. They’ll be outfitting it with hormone boosters up north though, so it should behave more... naturally”.

“None of this is natural. And, you know... it’s a ‘he’”.

“It’s an ‘it’. They aren’t made with reproductive parts or individuality. And stop giving it treats, it’s a waste of food”.

“But he’s a good boy, he just likes his melons”.

#

Everything stings.

Reminds of the time I walked over an old log that had a hornet’s nest inside.

Bees I can understand. Hornets... kill them with fire.

I don’t know what happened... but there’s sore spots on my arms and legs from where they bolted me down to the machinery... the restraints they use whenever they work on me... like after you get a shot, but much worse.

Covered in something... hard... and smooth. There’s wires and bumpy parts... I can’t move... something outside is bolting me down. I want to go back to sleep.

My vision is bad... there’s something like glass over my eyes but it glows like a screen. The room is dark, and the metal parts covering me are attached to some kind of elevator system. I hear music... faintly.

You kids like jazz?

#

“Damn Gluttons. You’re mistaken if you think your strength is a match for...”

#

“MECHA-OBADDION!!! RISE!!!”.

So screams the voice, obnoxiously so, and the elevator platform comes screeching to a halt in the center of the arena. The music is very loud here.

A cheering crowd... and an angry, slavering foe... foes...
Gluttons... three of them.



Damn it.

But I feel different... armored... powerful.

The twin metal pillars restraining my arms begin to sink down, and I snap free of the wires tying me to them... one at a time. I see my foot... it's covered in metal... like a robot.

I'm a flippin' robot. So this is what it feels like to be Plane Panther.

Mecha-Obaddion.

I lift up my foot and step off the elevator platform as it begins to sink down. The ground shakes, and I hear the clank of heavy metal. This is... nice. I feel stronger. My arms are decked out in all kinds of gear, body covered completely in wires and armor plating... I guess they don't recognize me as a monster... I'm too clean and shiny.

Another step. The Glutton directly across from me snaps its jaws twice and lunges. I swing my arm instinctively to strike it across the face, planting a fist directly in its mouth. A metallic click, and I watch as the Glutton's head explodes before my eyes.

Something tells me this Glutton fight won't go like the last.

A grating roar, and the two remaining Gluttons charge from behind. I grab the closest by the beak, whacking the other away with my tail... multitasking is much easier with three tons of metal protecting your skin. There's a little electric whirr, and a blade shaped like an oversized machete snaps out from each of my wrists.

The nearest Glutton screams but I've already driven the blade through its armored skull... by the time its friend is back on the scene I've wrenched the decapitated head loose and tossed it at its face. Two swift slices across the throat and it's down.

I suppose I can't credit myself... I've brought swords and knight's armor to a fist fight... but I'd say after being mauled by Gluttons twice I'm not feeling particularly sympathetic.

Gates in the sides of the arena come rumbling open like mouths vomiting undigested meals... the mini-Gluttons. They run out snapping and barking with rough voices, twenty or so, all headed towards me.

Really... they should think this through a bit more. I have fucking swords for hands.

Of course, they don't... I'm not sure the other monsters can think much... except Atrox... but Atrox's psychotic at best and a literal demon at worst. A swing of the arm and blood sprays into the electric field guarding the stands... I crush a downed mini-Glutton underfoot while

slicing another in half with my arm blades. Their teeth scratch the metal plating... just barely so... but it isn't skin. I feel nothing.

In half an hour they're all dead.

The crowd goes wild, but I'm not happy. I don't like it the way they do.

#

"Oh dear... the connection's failing... it seems..."

"What!? What's going on?"

"Mecha-Obaddion's going berserk! It has a mind of its own... the soul of the original Obaddion!"

#

Something new opens up, and my skin starts to burn.

I convulse in place and scream, clawing in vain at my armor plates... hoping to pull them off. Of course, it doesn't work, and the pain doesn't stop, because that's not what they want. How else would they make it look like their "robot" is going berserk?

Another elevator platform comes screaming upwards, the concrete of the arena floor parting mechanically in anticipation of its arrival. The same voice that announced my arrival declares that Plane Panther has come to put an end to my bloodthirsty rampage.

The whole thing's probably rigged in the thumbs-up boy's favor, but I'll be damned if I don't at least try to knock that stupid smile off his face.

#

Insert command: SHEATH SWORDS.

"Damn... it's not working"

"It's rejected the command?"

"Seems like it... I'll try again... same response"

"Is it a connection issue?"

"Not that... no... it's from 1954 itself. It just isn't responding. Systems are showing a change in its biomass... like it..."

"Like it's attached itself to the mecha-suit. Integrated its flesh..."

“Those swords aren’t going in any time soon”.

“Tell them to call it off... call it off NOW!”.

“They’re saying it’ll just make the fight more entertaining. Plane Panther can handle it. I always hated that name though, even if it’s for little ki...”.

“You don’t get it... he’s awoken”.

“He?”.

“It won’t work like it was programmed... because it’s rejected that programming. It... he... his regenerative ability is amazing. They always keep a few memories... just so it can function properly... eat, sleep, you know... but I think the regenerative hormones caused him to regrow things... the entirety of the old brain”.

“You don’t mean...”.

“Oh, I mean...”.

“Plane Panther is fucking screwed”.

#

Obaddion drove his right arm through one side of Plane Panther and out the other. The blade protruded straight out of its back, dripping with blood.

There goes the pilot.

He ripped his arm back out through his hulking metal foe and stepped backwards, watching quietly as it fell face-first with a loud thud.

I killed... a... a person.

No...

But they wanted to hurt me... just like a monster... it was just... just self-defense.

They wouldn’t be happy with him for it. In fact, they’d probably hate him.

The crowd was a mixed bag, all loud, all white noise to Obaddion in his horror.

He had to get out of there, and what better way than in a mechanized suit made in his likeness? His flesh bubbled like liquid, he could feel himself growing inside it, attaching himself to the parts and integrating them into his being. That was what had kept his swords out after all, against the wishes of those who had been controlling him.

They'll hurt me if they get me... kill me even... I killed one of them... no... no...

His reforming flesh switched on machinery he didn't even know was there, and he felt himself launching upwards, barreling up and tearing past the electrical barrier, crashing through the ceiling and soaring free... free into the heavens... into the stars... the deep cloak of night.

Free!

Obaddion flew in spirals, the rockets attached to his sides cutting through the skies with trails of red light and white smoke, the heat warming the cold night air around. For a second he thought he had flown into space... only now realizing that it was a city.

Another memory arose... seeing it from a small window in what seemed to be a massive cargo crate... looking at all the lights and thinking they were fallen stars. Only later did he realize that they were made in mockery of the stars.

#

The city sprawls onwards as far as I can see... a black mass speckled with multicolored lights and patches of ugly white... the pale electric lights of parking lots and concrete monstrosities, a grove of unholy trees spreading out into the dark horizon.

Everywhere I look... metal... pipes and wires... steel... slick glass... lights... none of it comforting. There's restaurant signs and a market advertising seafood and a massive moving-picture billboard showing Atrox fighting a purple and green robot with a horn on its head. I crash into them one at a time, losing bits of my metal plating, wrenching my limbs... it hurts to fly but I don't know how to control it.

I guessed I wished for freedom... but how will I find the world I left behind?

Maybe I must accept that it lives on only in memories.

Gone through so much... and with much more to come. I skid against an iridescent skyscraper that glitters like fish scales and tear through a wire-laden labyrinth of electrical infrastructure. Neon lights and pipes pulsing with energy like electric veins... this metal beast is made of man and a world unto itself.

Metal screeches like a dying pig as I crash through the industrial monster's glowing hide and crash into a deep, dark river of raw sewage.

#

I saw so much in a blink of an eye... a flashing instant, like lightning in that it is gone as quickly as it comes, but the memory will stay with you forever.

Ah... it burns!

Electric bones and arteries of bound fire mix poorly with liquified human shit. There's sparks and crackling and my skin feels like it's on fire... I can't describe it... nowhere near as visceral as it feels... the metal and plastic melts into my bubbling skin, toxic wastes spilling in my mouth and boiling my throat... dear God, end me now!

#

Obaddion grabbed his metal headpiece and tore it free without hesitation, screaming as it took the attached skin with it. He was left with bloody, raw flesh for a face, clambering to the slippery concrete lining the underground river and tearing chunks of steel off his arms... legs... anything his agonized hands could reach. Some snapped off on their own, rejected by convulsing muscles and dying epidermis, but most was ripped and torn by clawed hands, plates of steel taking skin and flesh alike, tossed at intervals to float in dark waters.

When it was done, he collapsed on his side and curled up into a ball, trembling. What his hands couldn't reach slowly melted into his skin,

fusing with the scar tissue and embedding into his being. He shook and whimpered on for hours until sleep eventually took him.

#

A bit of pale light flickered through a sewage grate and danced in patches on the wet concrete far below. Slopping, churning sounds as the river of human waste trudged slowly on, crawling from rusted pipes and cement caverns, carrying scattered islands of trash and refuse. Obaddion quietly watched the bloated, maggot-littered corpse of a rat float by mere inches from his face and decided it was time to get going.

Everything was raw, and painful. He couldn't see his reflection in the dark sludge but he knew what he would find: raw flesh, dried blood, chunks missing and broken patches of metal sunk into his skin.

Humans did this.

He hated them.

Trembling limbs forced a broken body on its feet and began walking, reluctantly. He lost his balance twice, falling face-first into the sewage once and colliding with the wall twice. A clawed hand reached out, gripping the nearby pipes for support.

Obaddion walked for perhaps an hour or so before he reached an immense, rusted grate that he managed to force down with his own immense weight. More walking, by then he was barely aware of where he was, slushing through pools of filth and crawling over pipes, and it was night by the time he stumbled into a quiet alleyway and collapsed in the trash.

#

Rats are filthy creatures. I awoke to a couple dozen of them gnawing on my open sores. They all scampered away before I could catch any.

Food.

I need it more than ever.

The beast inside demands to be fed, rumbling within my abdomen and making me cough up unused digestive fluid that ravages my already

damaged throat. It hurts too much to scream, I can only groan and vomit blood and pus.

Eating will hurt... but I need to...

The whole area has a retro sort of feel... neon lights dancing in the periphery of my vision... a synth redo of traditional music plays in the distance. I stumble like a drunk, knocking over plastic trash bins and trampling piles of cardboard, vomiting as I go. What little dignity I cared to maintain has vanished... this is me in my most... animalistic state... yet... food...

...can't think... right.

Damn... damn this... everything hurts...

...it hurts so bad... no one cares...

...I smell food...

Food is good... good...

...feed...

More lights... they're... beautiful... all sorts of colors... out of the alleyway...

...screams... why are they scared?

Why do they hate... who... me?

A car swerves out of my path as I stumble out onto the road, pissing myself...

...sorry... embarrassing...

...but I'm hungry...

...tired too... but if I sleep now...

Sleep would be good... let it all end...

...the urge to live is too strong... instinct defies reason.

The smell is stronger. I break glass... it hurts my skin...

...saw these on the TV... once... twice... maybe more... pizzas...

...I try one... screams are like white noise...

...they still hurt...

Pizza is good.

Feeling better. I eat more... more and more, they're all out on tables... some half-eaten.

Soon they are gone... everyone is gone... screaming.

They don't like monsters... unless they're locked away...

...more smells...

...I eat noodles and hamburgers and donuts... hotdogs taste bad but I eat those... too.

Food... good food... I'm in love...

...the lights are so pretty.

For a second... I don't care that no one wants me... here... that they're scared of me... that they hate me... that I'm a hideous creature... happy...

I'm happy, even if my skin hurts... even if I'm alone.

Three gunshots to the face put it all to an end.

#

Obaddion stood in place, gurgling as blood drizzled from his greasy lips. His body made weak attempts to grow over the holes in his skull, but failed. He collapsed with a thud, crushing the hood of a car under his mass.

"It's time to go home Obaddion".

"You fucking killed him!"

"Not him... it... and I didn't aim for the brain. We'll have to replace nearly all of its body parts... but it'll be fine".

"The armor plating melted into his skin... he was in pain..."

"It wasn't. Obaddion units are designed with dulled nervous systems. They barely feel a thing".

"This one does... the regenerative hormones grew back his brain... and his brain's been trying to grow back his... old body... he feels differently... works differently. Ever notice how his eyes are closer to the center of his head than others... forward-facing... like chimps?"

"We're sending it away in a week".

“How can you be so cruel?”

“Because I don’t care. It isn’t a person. It isn’t even an animal. It has no right to exist”.

#

A vault... a domain... a prison...

The little land in which I dwell... an aged square of concrete with cracked walls and stained floors... scrapes from my claws line the cement like grooves in the bark of a tree. Once there was an ugly pumpkin-orange paint over it all, but that mostly peeled away long before I got here, lying in tattered remnants on the roof by the window.

I watch the light flow in... like a little stairway to unobtainable heavens.

God... if you care... please take me... I’m tired of hurting.

I want to see the angels... better things... no more blood.

Tired of having them glue back my skin and sew on new muscles. It’s been about two years... maybe more... I’m on my fourth set of organs... third coating of new skin... they carted away two massive piles of metal and scar tissue after they were done with me...

Mecha-Obaddion... such torture... all in the name of cheesy entertainment. The man in the cartoon mouse suit overheats all day, tanking kicks to the crotch just so spoiled brats can live their fantasies... and likewise with me... burning alive in a metal prison all so humans can see their television monster battles in real life.

I hate this.

Even so, I suppose I’ve turned the pain into understanding... filled the holes of my ignorance with knowledge, knowledge born in blood and fear.

Afraid. Me. It seems comical, doesn’t it? A joke. The terrifying monster, fifty feet long with canines longer than bananas... a banana is always necessary for conveying scale... scared.

But I am. I'm scared of humans. I'm scared of fighting. I'm scared of myself... those dark thoughts... moments of rage... the things I do when the adrenaline kicks in...

All of this is mine and mine alone... unknown to the world... sealed within a chest of bone and flesh locked away in these grey and orange walls... no one will hear, and if they did, they wouldn't care. The other monsters don't care either... they work like they're supposed to, living for the carnage. I am an abomination among abominations, unable to properly do the one thing for which I was intended.

Someday I'll die having lived a long, hard life of blood and pain and stony walls. For now I claw at the concrete and paint on the open spots... leaving pieces behind... maybe whatever dwells here next will see them for what they are, but I hope not. I hope that there will never be another like me, as long as the sun shines and the moon rises for the night, let there never be any Obaddions save I, and I alone.

Chapter Five

The Beast Inside

Late at night, passing in and out of sleep after a bad dream, a dream where he was with people, people he thought cared for him, but they were mad, and they started to yell. That was when he heard it.

It was loud, and the tremors of its coming shook the earth and the pale lights atop his room. He awoke with a jolt and tensed up, pointlessly scanning his cell with wide eyes as the noise sounded again. Not a roar, not a scream, a metal sound, a cruel sound, of artificial things. A manmade monster.

He never managed to fall back asleep, instead listening as the steel dragon groaned and came to a halt, accompanied by human voices, doing things he could only guess as to what, and futilely at that.

In the morning they opened his door, and he saw it and remembered that it was a train.

#

It was during the first month of winter that they forced Obaddion out of his cell and onto a cramped metal train car like the one that had taken him there in the first place.

He had tried to stay in his cell. They had shocked him with the prods until he left, and then shocked him even more when he panicked and tried to run away. The prods, which had pointed edges like pikes and blackened the skin they shocked, were very persuasive. He walked the rest of the way to the train without resistance, only allowing himself a few brief glances of the world outside his cell. There was concrete and more concrete and metal things and humans with guns (he figured they would shoot if he got too close) and an icy puddle he had splashed in, only to receive another blow from the prods for doing so.

They guided him up a ramp, forced him into the confinement that awaited him with their prods and slammed the metal door shut behind him.

In the train car there was a bit of straw bedding and a water dish.

Having had nothing to eat for over a week, he tried to eat the straw. It tasted like urine.

They put other monsters on the train too, he could hear them screaming and hitting the walls. *Poor fools*. Knowing there was no escape, Obaddion resigned himself to lying down on the floor and waiting for whatever cruel fate was to come.

A loud, awful, prolonged sound split the air, the wheels began to grind, and he was on his way. The people outside were all smiles. All things considered, it had gone very well.

#

One week. Then another. The train climbed up and out of the industrial cesspool that was the city, pushing on through mountains... mountains!

Obaddion could just barely glimpse them, peaking through the ventilation grates lining the bottom of his train car. The air was fresh, albeit tainted by steam and gasoline. There was snow, and trees, flying by in an instant, gone before he could properly fathom them.

Just like the memories.

His dish had spilled on the initial climb up the mountains. They never refilled it, so he drank the moisture trickling down his walls. They never fed him either, and with each passing day his monstrous appetite cried out louder and louder. Bored, he chewed on his empty dish and imagined it was food.

At night it was deathly cold. His car had a heater, which he clung to for dear life, even if it burned his skin. It was in those quiet moments that he thought the most, beyond any light save the bright false stars further up on the train, beyond any sound but the mechanical rumbling of the engine

pushing him ever onwards, beyond any smell but that of gasoline and urine.

#

Once, when I was in the arena, a little boy pretended to roar at me. He was carrying an action figure of a three-headed dragon in one hand and a Obaddion plushy in the other.

I hated it. I hated him for it. I hated being just a toy... just something to entertain...

I roared back. He began to cry.

It's not because I'm some oblivious beast... because I don't know how to keep my nature under control. It's because blood and bones and tissue didn't mix well. None of this, none of me is natural. They take me apart and put me back together again, stitching me up with the organs of other things, putting things in me that make my skin grow back in record time, things that make my attitude ferocious and my teeth sharp.

I know enough about myself to understand my flaws, but I don't have enough control over my body to better them. I hate it. Almost as if there are two Obaddions... the savage, ravenous beast... and the thinking mind, the one that just wants to be free. Constantly warring for control. When things get hard the beast always wins... harnessing my hunger, rage, fear, hatred. My nature is that of a bloodthirsty killer, but my mind is intelligent enough to know that is wrong, and it's awful.

The urges are so overwhelming. I'm always mad, tearing at myself because there's nothing else to break. I want to kill every last one of those disgusting creatures up in the stands... not good... but I want to. I can't overcome this rage and hatred, so my better nature is doomed to watch as I slowly decline. It seems as if with the increase of my intelligence I progressively sacrifice more and more of my innocence, becoming more bitter, more angry.

I hate myself.

#

Beginning to question things, more than before.

It isn't my infernal hunger this time... even if that dulls my thoughts... I have a reason to be angry.

Dreading the lonely, uneventful, and identical day. Wake up. Sit. Stare out into a world I'll never walk upon again. Piss in the corner and watch it trickle towards me when the train goes up a hill. No one checks on my crumbling health... no more than they need to keep me alive... just barely functional enough to go out and fight some slaving beast from Hell. Doubting I matter to anymore... so long as they get their cinematic bloodshed. The apes distinguishing themselves as humans parade notions of despising violence and cruelty but they endorse it all the same... it is the climax of nearly all their televised fantasies, because just as chimps enjoy ripping off each other's testicles so do humans enjoy slaughtering their fellow persons... even if they say it's wrong. No one sees violence for what it is... they expect power-moves and beam-attacks... anime... superhero kind of shit... but when monsters fight it's all teeth and claws... doesn't matter if you're still alive, if you can't get away... they start eating...

Atrox...

I fucking hate that name.

The curved blades of my claws flaunt their magnificence, keratin glistening softly in the pale light of winter days... tempting experimentation... a change born in blood. The wall is hard... if I hit my head against it enough... my inner critic will never shut up.

God won't just let me die... time after time I'm torn apart... but this mess of a body is more machine than beast... manufactured blood and synthetic organs. It will never end... not until they grow bored of me and let me rot.

Christmas passes in a lonely dark night... I hear them celebrating.

It Christmas. Mer Christmas.

What do I hold on for?

Craving melons. It's been awhile since I've had any... anything to eat at all actually.

Do I keep going for animalistic pleasures? Or perhaps something borne of fear... what comes next... the punishment for ending it all...

The train grinds to a halt, and I drift off into a quiet sleep.

#

There's one of those big televisions they use for announcements and commercials and general nonsense. I can see it, if I lay down and look through the grates along the bottom of my train car. People are nearby, waiting in lines for... what are those... tickets? Yes, they're buying tickets. For what I can only guess. Probably arena fights.

In the meantime, Plane Panther's on the TV advertising the power of some kind of pre-packaged noodle meal while cartoon renditions of me and Atrox dance in the background. A lovely reminder that I got absolutely destroyed by a kids-show robot that preaches messages of friendship and teamwork.

Guess we're famous. Who would have figured, seeing as I live in a concrete cell that's basically the equivalent of a human living in a bathroom stall, minus the toilet. Speaking of, I feel like I need to take a dump.

Which is odd when I consider that I haven't eaten in three weeks.

#

"You sure we aren't supposed to feed it?"

"Says right here to leave Version 1954 until... hmm... the 25th"

"Seems kinda harsh"

"It'll fight better if it's hungry. Besides, haven't you watched any nature documentaries? They say crocodiles go months without eating. Pretty sure the Obaddions are made from crocodiles, so..."

"Well, Atrox units are all just heavily modified clawed frogs. And apparently the Gluttons are fucked-up chickens. I've never heard what

Obaddions are made from, but they have ears and those freaky human teeth, so I guess they could really be anything”.

“Either way, one less monster to feed means one less chance of getting eaten”.

“They aren’t that bad. Except some of the Atrox units. Spastic dickheads...”.

“They aren’t bad because we bring weapons. Speaking of, is the prod charged? We’re supposed to clean up the train cars this afternoon while they’re unloading”.

“Almost full power. Seems like a waste of time though, considering that those cars will get crapped in again as soon as we’re done cleaning them”.

“Eh, it’ll pile up if we don’t”.

#

Welcome back to another episode of my blog.

Today I just took the biggest fucking shit I’ve ever made.

I suppose it’s just the lovely end product of not having food for a while. My body retained all its waste, only to climax in a diarrhetic, semi-liquid mixture splattered over the entirety of my train car. It’s humiliating, but there was nothing I could do to hold it in. Guess I am just a stupid animal after all, even if I try to resist it. Shitting myself and laying in it...

I’m disgusting.

The best part is that there’s nothing I can do about it. I can’t change the reflection I see in my water dish, nor can I get the maggots out of my skin. I can’t stop being angry, hitting the walls, screaming at voices that aren’t there. It hurts, watching myself decline, knowing what’s happening but being unable to stop it.

There’s blood in the slurry of liquid feces too, red walls and rancid floors. Combined with the ugly artificial smells of gasoline and trash and human sweat, it’s a revolting assault on the senses. I don’t like this place.

It's crowded, too crowded, and even as the hours go by there's people everywhere, people talking, people swarming by the train cars.

I hear them, and sometimes they use words I understand.

"When I was little, these guys were on TV every Saturday morning. Looking back, it was cheesy, but they've really shaped them up over the years. Who would've thought that in twenty years they'd become real?"

"I don't like it".

"Then why'd you come here?"

"Because you wanted to. I'd rather stay in the hotel. These things are... unnerving. Things could have been nice, but we made our own monsters. Our very own. They should have stayed in the television".

We made our own monsters.

Hmm...

Make.

Some of the shit's begun to dry on my lower jaw. It's disgusting, but there's nowhere better to rest. The entirety of the car's floor is covered with it.

"Eww... it smells like poo in here".

"He fricken' shat himself!"

I hate children. They're painfully oblivious to the feelings of any besides themselves.

Right now they're poking their fingers through the grates along the bottom of the train car, which I'm guessing are there to help the water flow out when they pressure-wash the inside. Also for air, but there's grates on the top for that.

At first I try and ignore them. I'm tired after all, my body doesn't want to move. I think of running in the woods and swimming and digging and knocking down trees... what happened? I don't even have the energy to wipe my own shit off myself now. All I want is sleep... and food.

Food...

They smell like it...

Something hard jabs me in the side, they're sticking plastic swords through the grates and poking me. They're the kind the big robots use, I've fought a few others besides Plane Panther. Most are humanoid, save one that looks like a mechanical dinosaur and has jazz music for its theme song. Apparently it goes berserk sometimes.

Anyways, the robots always win. It's set up that way, and, besides, a set of teeth and claws are useless against a hand-held motherfucking artillery gun. I hate fighting robots. At least with other monsters I know I have a chance of coming out on top, because with the monster battles people don't seem to care as long as there's blood. If memory serves me right, they do cast bets on who will come out on top, like horse racing, but instead of racing it's fighting, and instead of horses it's a bunch of angry bootleg dinosaurs.

The little kids keep poking me and making oblivious shit jokes, so I roll on my side and relieve myself so as to spray the urine directly through the grates and onto their nasty faces. They run away shrieking like the apes from which they are descended. Now that I think of it, that's a rather crude comparison. At least apes stick to the forests instead of throwing their mess everywhere else.

There's yelling and I wait. A memory flashes by, perhaps multiple, of sitting alone, waiting. In white rooms, ugly lights. I was afraid of people, always people. I guess some things are just innately cruel and menacing, like orcs in high fantasy. Fantasies. They sound fun, but I wouldn't fit in there. They'd hunt me down just like they hunted their dragons, their trolls, their sea serpents. At best I would be switching out this train car for a cave, or a swamp. Somewhere monsters belong.

Time flies when you're having fun, and it crawls obstinately when you're awaiting inevitable doom. I guess I should've known pissing on those kids' faces would get me in trouble. Perhaps simply scooting to the other side of the car would have sufficed, but I was angry, and too tired to

move. My strength is meaningless, I'm always trapped, and hungry. It was only ever given to me for the spectacle of it all anyways.

Metal groans and wails, the sliding door of my train car unhinges and opens up.

"Oh... FUCK!".

It's one of the... tourists I'm guessing... outside. There's a crowd gathered from a safe distance, decked out in multicolored coats and boots to stave off the winter cold. Children run around against the wishes of worried parents, shrieking and kicking around their toys.

In the more pertinent foreground are some of my "keepers". They all wear blue uniforms. Some are armed with scrub brushes, others prods. Two stand from a safe distance, equipped with guns. Another rolls up a massive red hose on a cart. They stand there, held in place by their unwillingness to accept that they must clean up what I've made. That's one good thing of being thought a dumb beast, I guess. People don't expect me to clean up my own wastes.

A decision is made based on their collective anger, manifesting itself into the whirring, angry electrical buzz of a prod. I scream. No one is sorry. The crowds outside clamor and shriek like apes.

Now comes the hose, hurling its liquid fury against the rusted, shit-caked floors of the train car. More than once they aim for my face, but at least it cleans the crap off.

#

"Fuck...."

"We've established that already"

"Did it really have to drag it all over the floor?"

"It's an animal. It doesn't know any better"

"Maybe its pea-brain should at least register that poop is gross and shit in the corner like everyone else"

"Just keep scrubbing"

“This hose is terrible. They call it a pressure washer, but it’s about as powerful as the hose in my backyard, and a pain in the ass to use”.

“They’re cheap with everything but their five-million dollar robots and monsters”.

“Imagine... five million bucks for a weird knockoff Spinosaurus that shits itself”.

“They spend the bare minimum on facilities... besides what the guests see, those are nice enough. As for transportation, security, housing for the monsters... it’s dogshit...”.

“Obaddion shit”.

“Yeah, anyways, it’s awful. We’re expected to try and control these things with electric prods. Like the ones they use on cattle!”.

“Come on, they’re a lot more powerful than cattle prods. A shock from one would kill us if we were on the receiving end”.

“But we’re talking about a monster the size of a bus here. It’ll crush a man with a single bite. If it gets mad enough, these prods aren’t doing shit”.

“Beats working at a grocery store. Or any fast-food places”.

“Sure, but I spent four years in college to be a zookeeper. Not a professional movie-monster shit cleaner. I guess it’s cool in a way though. I grew up watching Obaddion on TV. Now I get to clean up after the real deal”.

#

Alone. Waiting. He always seemed to be doing that.

They had moved the train car off the train and atop some kind of massive conveyor-belt-esque machine that promptly brought him into a large building much like the one he had lived in for so long, the one housing his cell. Metal parts clicked and snapped into place, the car jostled and grew still.

Cleaning had taken maybe an hour. Obaddion had huddled in the corner, moved to action despite his exhaustion. The prods hurt too much to

be resisted. They hit him anyway. Of course, because they were mad, because they had to clean up a liquid mess of blood and feces. Who wouldn't be angry?

Still, they didn't care that he had defecated blood, that he hadn't eaten for weeks.

He was so hungry...

More waiting, and then they moved him out of the train car into another room, gently persuading him off the ground with their prods. When he walked too slow, one fired a gun at his feet. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why people liked guns so much. They were frightening, to say the least, and very loud.

The new room was about the same size as his cell but white with laminate floors and a few metal drains on the bottom. No windows, no water dish. There were some pipes with nozzles hanging from the roof. He didn't bother investigating them, instead retiring to the corner where he sat down and drifted off into sleep.

#

Water. Warm water. I used to enjoy sitting out in the rain, to feel it flow through the grooves in my skin, trickle down my spine and splatter out on the muddy ground below. Everything was lush and green and peaceful, complex in a beautiful sort of complexity but easy upon the mind. Rain on the pines. It made sense. Nothing does now.

I don't belong here. It's all some kind of whacked-out conspiracy.

No one else liked the rain. Which is fine, because then I can have it to myself. I can be alone with my thoughts and the sounds of rainfall. I haven't really had that kind of peace since they took me away. Alone in the cell, but there's voices and metal-sounds and bad smells. I haven't been at peace for a long time.

Everyone likes sunny weather, it's the sunny days that are the calmest at the arena. That's because people didn't go as much when the weather was nice, when they could go to the beach or the zoo instead.

When it was grey or rainy, that's when they came, because they needed a reprieve from reality. A brief escape into one of their fantasies, a world with monsters, where you can solve everything with giant robots and the power of friendship. But those don't work. Just like this, I remember using it to escape, to hide. Long showers are fun, but in eventuality the water runs dry and you're forced to clamber up from the laminate and back into bed.

They're giving me a shower. Probably because they want me presentable. I suppose I look better without feces and dried blood on my skin, but that skin looks like a scab to begin with, so the effort is pretty futile. Not to complain. It was cold in that train car. This is nice.

Very nice. The crap's all coming off now, and the water's soaking into my skin, my old wounds. I don't bother getting up, it's comfortable enough on the floor.

After a few minutes the water stops. A door opens out of the laminate, and people come back in. As expected, there are prods, and I am ushered into yet another room. It's a cell, smaller than my normal one, with clean walls and a dish of water. I drink and resign myself to the floor again, hoping for food. I want to eat so badly, even those blocks of kibble sound good. Food...

Maybe I should have tried to eat my keepers, but a faint memory tells me that my soaking wet body and an electrical prod are not a good combination. As usual, I'm not entirely sure as to why, but these memories of mine are the only things staving off my confusion and giving me any means of interpreting this world. Ironically, they're also spurring my madness in the first place. I don't know who or what I really am, nor whether anything I think is true. The only truths are the walls that surround me, the pain of the prods, and the infernal hunger within my broken body.

The door to my new cell opens up after possibly an hour in silence. A couple keepers walk in, happier than usual, more carefree. Perhaps I could catch them off guard...

And feed...

Hmm...

Damn it, of course they have to bring a gun. Apes and their sticks, men and their guns. Some things never change.

One of them has a doll. They seem to be enthralled by it, more so than the children for which it was probably intended. They're laughing and shoving each other and looking perfectly delicious. If only it weren't for the gun... and if I wasn't so... tired.

With a complete lack of caution, yet caution all the same, one approaches me with the doll. It's cartoonish, with a big eyes and short, blue hair, like a character from the weird shows they kept playing on the television back in my old cell.

They're making a considerable fuss over it.

The man crouches down perhaps a meter from my face and slides the doll across the slippery concrete. It lands by my chin, which I lift to rest upon it. Better than the hard floor.

They're absolutely hysterical, laughing and snapping photos with their phones. In dark times past the apes looked to the light of the sun and worshipped it, now they have rejected their old sun and made new ones in the images of fire and steel, and to these now they hold an even greater obsession.

I can't blame them. Television is lovely.

If I've had a good day recently this is it. I got a warm shower, a cleaner place to live, and a cute little pillow. There's quite possibly some kind of crude joke behind the doll, but I'm too tired to care. I guess hunger and exhaustion have a bit of good in them: they keep you from getting picky.

The lights stay on. They're ugly. Part of the wall slides away to reveal a television. A flash of light, and a show starts playing, something about robots.

I suppose my keepers are not entirely cruel.

Still, I'm so hungry... and tired...

Everything hurts, and not just from my wounds. My body is dissolving itself again. It's eaten away all the fat, leaving loose skin and weak bones. They're what's going next, bone and muscle. All my strength is fading, just to keep my laying here. But it won't hold off what's coming. Not for long. I feel that great things are on the horizon, great and terrible things. What lays beyond flesh and meat I don't know. Will I simply go to the dust and worms, or will I see God? Is there anything beyond this? I guess one must hope for paradise.

There's always that want for something better, even if it doesn't exist. Perhaps ideas of an afterlife are simply that, or perhaps a form of hope. Or, if the concept of Hell is real and not just my dysfunctional brain shitting itself again, a way to keep people in check, to force morals. Maybe if I control myself, endure, maybe I'll go somewhere good, and see the people who hurt me be punished. Or perhaps we'll merely come to understand each other. Maybe I'll see angels. I don't remember what they look like, but faint notions tell me they're beautiful. A past life, perhaps, or maybe something more sinister. I can't understand it, but I suppose the key to comprehending the incomprehensible is recognizing that it's incomprehensible in the first place.

What am I?

Who was I?

I guess I'll never know, as long as I'm trapped behind walls and my keepers' notions that I'm just a dumb animal. Yet a possibility exists that I can change that...

Once I asked, to no reply. But this is a different place. They seem nicer here.

Giving up won't do any good, even if I'm eating myself alive. Everyone's different, some might care more than others. I know what I must do:

Write.

Again...

Recollecting the words will be hard. I'll have to strain myself to remember. But there's a chance it'll change things. For the better, or maybe the worse. I don't know.

There's not much time. I'll use myself if I have to... my own blood.

If I have a fight in the arena I'll try and write there... as long as I manage to win.

Hope is a nasty thing. It gets you going, lets you peak into a better future. But all too often it fails, and tragedy, failure, defeat... they're all the more crushing when there was a want for success in the first place. I don't know how much longer I can keep going...

So tired. I just want to sleep...

Voices come from the TV. I'm too tired to look, but I understand them. It's baffling. I am not human. I should not know these words, yet somehow knowledge of them was given unto me. Looking back to my years in the woods, I've changed. Not entirely for the better.

"Those armor plates were just there to restrain it!", screams a distraught voice. It's not really there, just a fantasy, a screen ghost, part of a world I can't enter. I am alone, and tired.

What am I?

A monster?

Fight and die.

Perhaps I can prove I deserve more... that I am more...

"The beast inside is finally free!".

But I'm so tired...

Tomorrow...

If the keepers hadn't started jabbing Obaddion with their prods, he probably never would have woken up. It was a grey, busy morning, with fresh snow.

The arena was far larger than the one he knew, and more like a football stadium than most monster arenas. It was open air, with a concrete flat spanning the center. All around were walls too steep and tall to climb. No need for anything more.

Besides, escape wasn't on his mind.

#

They strapped him down to an elevator platform, arms tied to metal posts on either side, a collar around the neck. Safety for the keepers was a bigger priority there.

Music began, and the elevator shot up into the arena and stopped with a hard jolt.

Opposite of Obaddion rose another platform, shaking with the struggles of its confine.

An electronic click, and the restraints weakened. He snapped off the wires and chains one arm at a time, jerking free only to slouch forward and catch his breath with raspy, wheezing motions.

Whether he liked it or not, it was time to fight.

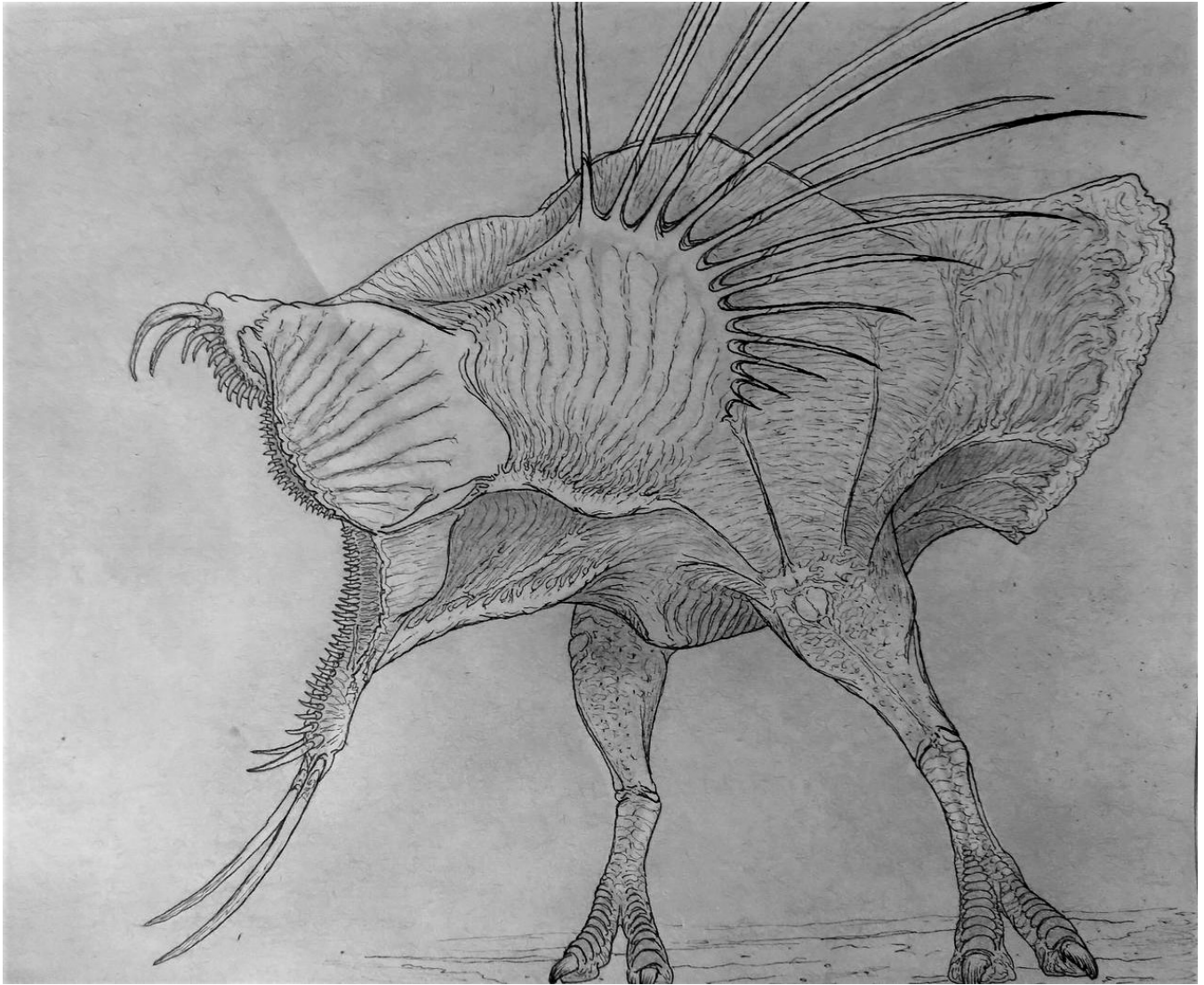
#

They call my opponent the "Pale Queen".

Seems like they took an anglerfish, grew it to the size of a truck, and gave it legs.

Perhaps I should be more considerate, and call it a "she". She's a monster after all. Relatable queen.

Pale and pinkish, like human skin, but with thin, short stripes like faded blood. She comes out screaming, flaring out fin-things on her flanks with long hairs and cilia. The smell is of fish, fresh, and wriggling.



My legs wobble, the bones even weaker than before. Strangely, I find a will to stand. A hunger...

From the toothy maw opposite of mine comes a guttural sound like a dying pig. She clacks her jaws twice, cocks her head, and charges. I turn to swat her away with my tail, but a flying leap places her well out of reach. A two-clawed foot plants itself in my throat, and I skid across the ground. My body can't support itself very well anymore, one of my legs bends unnaturally and pulls a tendon.

I scream. They cheer.

The Pale Queen swings her head, planting the straight, tusk-like fangs of her lower jaw into my shoulder. They sink in deep, forcing me to the ground. It hurts, but it's numb all the same. Nothing works like it used to.

I guess I'm giving up, even if I don't really want to. No...

I must fight. I must be strong. I can't cry.

Yet I'm so tired...

A mouth flashes before my eyes, as big as a garage door, lined with hooked teeth and pulsating, slobbering mess. She screams like a pig.

Fuck this.

I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to resist. Behind this monstrous form is a broken soul, a pale, crawling thing shying away from the light. But no one knows that except myself. The world requires that I must be a monster, a fighter, even if I'm horrible at it.

Just barely I feel the teeth sinking into my flesh. She's trying to swallow me whole. Like that's ever gonna happen...

Something breaks, and I bite her tongue, ripping both its tip and myself free but earning several long, jagged scrapes across my left flank as a result. My opponent bellows and snaps at my face, but I stumble back. The protruding tusks just barely miss my throat. She pulls away for another strike, darting through the snow only to turn and charge, bounding into a short leap that ends as a kick to the face. I spit out blood and skid across the snow, catching myself and regaining balance just in time to greet those angry jaws. This time I dodge to the side, catching hold of her leg in my own teeth.

She screams, turning her head to plunge the tusks into my flank.

My jaws bite down harder, there's a crunch as her calf breaks between my teeth. The Pale Queen tears loose a mess of skin and screeches, stumbling backwards as I drive my shoulder spikes into her exposed stomach. The slimy flesh parts, avulsed by the sudden protrusion. There's blood.

With a last show of willful strength I shove her away, sending her sliding into the cement wall. She collapses on her side, breathing painfully. Everything hurts, but at least I have a moment to rest. My legs give out, and I collapse on all fours. There's blood on my teeth.

I see you, but do you see me?

Aye, nay, for ye have no eyes, ya see!

Yer teeth hath tasted me flesh and spurred my hide, say now I sate my glut upon yer own supple being? Aye, aye, an eye for an eye as the good book says!

Food...

I'm reminded of my infernal hunger. It's eating me alive, breaking my bones. I can barely breathe, foaming at the mouth, throat agonized and cracked in the cold, dry air. If only for proper lungs to scream!

Food...

She smells of fish... so juicy sweet...

Just a little taste...

No... I must... remember... prove I'm not a monster...

I'm losing myself. The blood dances on my tongue... three weeks! Three weeks without food! Three damn weeks! I just want something to eat!

Yet I must resist. I have to write my message. There's better uses for the blood.

I'm slipping away. I can't... always be strong... it hurts...

The beast inside is finally free!

Feed...

Feed!

FEED!!!

I lick the blood from my teeth and rear up. I hear myself screaming, but I'm not consciously doing it. I don't even realize it's happened until after I did it, until I collapsed back on all fours and began crawling towards the Pale Queen... relatable queen... food...

#

“No... no... fuck no... we have to stop it!”.

“No. Let him feed”.

“Him!?”.

#

Obaddion rose uneasily on his hind legs and roared, deep and guttural, fading off into a moan as blood and saliva gushed from his cracked mouth. The audience cheered with delight, standing up in their seats and climbing as close as they could, just daring to cling to the barriers separating the stands from the edge of the wall, watching as the monster fell to the ground, limbs splayed out at awkward angles. They cheered louder as he rose back up, clambering uneasily like a child's attempt at playing the beast, body swerving from side to side as he crawled to the wheezing, gasping creature that was the Pale Queen.

Blood and urine, his body was losing control of itself and spewing waste from various orifices, frothy saliva and black vomit, drizzling behind the emaciated form. He fell again, scrambling back up with clumsy motions, practically dragging himself to his fellow monster. Whatever semblance of intelligence was gone. Now there was only the beast, and it hungered.

#

“That's a 6.4 million dollar asset right there! We are not letting it become food! Call off the fight!”.

“She won't live, even if we try and save her. That injury's too bad”.

“People won't like this...”.

“No, they'll LOVE it! It's absolutely brutal, and that's what they want”.

#

Obaddion dropped to his knees before the bleeding pink form of his opponent, the Pale Queen, who was paler than ever before, white and red upon the beautiful snow. She lifted her head weakly, and if emotion could

be given to that horrendous face it would be described as sheer terror. The mouth uttered a banshee scream as Obaddon's clawed hand plunged into the open wound of the stomach and dug around, ripping out a dripping white intestine and yanking it free in a slurry of greasy fluid.

Now the audience was speechless.

More screams, constant, as Obaddon ripped out the slimy innards and threw them aside. With both hands he grabbed edges of the wound and ripped it further apart, frothing with white teeth and bulging eyes, oblivious to anything but the urge to feed. He tore loose more of the intestines, which were as thick as small tree trunks, ripping off chunks and gulping them down.



His jaws burrowed deep in the abdomen, wrenching free more viscera, greedy for living flesh, scraping the fat with his claws and tearing strips of slick, red liver. Children in the stands began to cry, sounding not unlike the death wails of the Pale Queen as she kicked in her own blood. Bits of bloody meat and entrails were flung across the arena, staining the snow red and splattering against the walls.

Gurgling and moaning with primal noises of a mind once reserved and thoughtful, bloody with animalistic carnage. Obaddion slavered and shoved the heaps of intestines down his maw, squelching the rubbery flesh

under his teeth. The Pale Queen turned her head in a final display of resistance, snapping with jaws that vomited blood amidst other things. He merely grabbed her face in his mouth and, pinning her body down with trembling limbs, ripped it off and ate it.

#

“It sounds like a cross between a wendigo, a train, and a foghorn”.

“Stop this!”.

“What did you expect a monster fight to look like? Did you think it would just be ten minutes of beam-spam power moves? Or did you expect to be all staged and cinematic? These are animals. They will fight like animals do, and, contrary to the cartoon shows that portray nature as a happy paradise, that fighting is savage. Eaten alive! I love it!”.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”.

“A lot. But aren’t we all just a bit screwed up, even if we don’t want to admit it?”.

#

No...

What did... did I?

I was so hungry...

Everything became a blur. I didn’t know... I didn’t know...

I just remembered being hungry... and tired... and smelling blood.

But there it is at my feet, the mangled carcass of the Pale Queen, distorted beyond recognition. The face is gone, the jaws are split in half. The stomach is a hollow cavity twisted over itself with intestines lying nearby in a bloody pile, the legs are trampled.

I did this...

To think I was going to try and prove I was something better... something besides... besides... a monster...

But that’s all I am...

A monster.

What the fuck is wrong with me!? No... no... no! It wasn't me... something else... the urge to feed... I tried to stop it... but it was too strong... what will they think of me?

I look to the stands, expecting them to be appalled. Expecting them to be horrified, angry. To despise me... the savage beast... eating its peers alive... if only I didn't have this sentience. If only I really was just a stupid animal. But I'm not... I'm an awful one.

When I look up, some are crying. The little ones, this isn't like their television shows. But there's others... standing up... they're...

They're cheering.

Chapter Six

Memories of Fall

Today they're doing another organ transplant.

I know because they gassed my cell again. It smells bad, and I am alone. I hold my doll close, as if it will keep the demons away.

They come when I finally collapse. I held on for a long time. I don't like it there, all bright lights and metal things. My sides always hurt after they're done. I see the door creaking open and feet walking upon my floor, and then everything fades into darkness.

#

New heart, new lungs, new stomach.

Perhaps they're good things. The old ones weren't doing so great after all.

My blood flows better. They've refilled my water dish, so I drink. But my new intestines don't work well, and my body rejects them.

It takes over an hour to vomit them out.

#

Again they take me, and I wake up on the floor. Everything hurts. My sides are covered in stitches. Hopefully they heal before the next fight. This time, however, I can drink.

I'm trying my best not to descend. To fall back and start where I began. I keep telling myself that I won't, that I can't... I must be strong... I am Obaddion... the definition of strength.

But it's hard. I occupy myself with quiet ponderance, unraveling my mind, peering into the miniscule details of the concrete and searching for meaning. It's not there, and I turn to animalistic rage.

I think they put something else inside me... something new. It makes me mad, not the literal addition of it but what it does... the slightest

disturbance brings a flash of heat and rage... something to do with hormones. They've fucked me up.

Monsters must be fierce and angry. They don't want a quiet, calm Obaddion. They want the Obaddion that disemboweled the Pale Queen and ate off her face. They want something to kill and destroy. Even if I try and convince myself that I am better, I revert back to those bestial tendencies. Wanting to take it out on myself because I can't take it out on anyone else.

Even the deserving.

Never again.

My reflection has never been very nice. I see it in my water dish. It has gleaming white teeth and skin like charred wood, like dried blood. A great, big pumpkin grin. Someone read a line like that to me in a book once. I wish I could read.

Ho ho! Hee hee!

Mice will run when they see me!

Dancing on the waters, my reflection smiles, but it's not friendly. It always says the wrong thing, like "why the fuck are you crying?"

The rippling mirror shatters and splashes against the floor. Amidst the iridescent splatter it answers its own question.

Ages ago, if my television and faint notions, memories perhaps, can be trusted, slimy things crawled up out of the ocean with fins that became legs. Some grew scales and from these scale-bearing things came others with fur. Thus mammals, noble, furred mammals were borne, and so were the hideous, crawling reptiles, reptiles that became dinosaurs, monsters, the creatures to which I owe my image.

Humanity is drawn to what repulses them. They share the same origin.

They fear they're heading towards the same end.

So they represent their own conflicted nature with monsters.

Because, as distant and savage as monsters are, they're inexplicably human. I believe I share human emotions, human sorrow, human tragedies. Maybe I don't. I would never want to lock humans in a cell and force them to fight, if not for the fact that they've done that to me.

The duality of man. Humans have an inherent fear of monsters. It's actually a fear of being monsters themselves, because, deep down, people know they are more cruel and twisted than their fictional television beasts ever could be.

I'm finally starting to cultivate that ferocity they wanted me to harness. Every day I get angrier. At first I was shocked when I felt mad. Appalled. Even now I'm sometimes disgusted with myself, but then I remember all the things they've done. As if I need to try. All I must do is recognize the pain in my side, my aching bones, the walls around me.

If only they'd respect me. If only they'd respect that I feel pain and boredom, that I don't want to be this way. I've been aching for the woods for so long, to feel the sun and smell pine sap on a chilly autumn morning. But I've been thinking. After all, I'm barely functioning as a sapient, reasonable individual, more so a psychopath barely maintaining some façade of sanity.

Maybe it would be better if I never went back.

Maybe I'm too awful for such things, good things.

Maybe it all needs to end.

#

I don't really know what time of year it is anymore. I would guess it's nearing the end of winter, but there's no window in this cell. It's still very cold though.

Thankfully, there's a heater in the corner of my little prison. Consisting of coiled metal tubes, its warmth is very localized and just barely avoids burning my skin. On the worst nights, ones like this where the spilled water and piss begins to turn to ice, I huddle up against it as much as I can.

In a way, it's quite nice. I like seeking the warmth, listening to the still quiet of my lonely little world. Sometimes it's interrupted by the sounds of trains. I like to think I'm not as scared of them as I used to be, but sometimes I still hold my doll closer when they pass by. It makes a good pillow.

A rat scampers out of one of the ventilation grates. Its fur is rough and matted, and it watches the world more with its nose than with its bulging black eyes, constantly sniffing and pawing at the stony ground.

They played a show on the TV the other day where a rat worked as a chef or something. I'm not really sure. I looked away because I didn't want to feel hungry... and think about the fight with the Pale Queen... about what I did. I let myself go too far.

Hello, little rat.

If I put you on my head, will you teach me how to cook?

The rat pees on my face, so I eat him.



#

With each empty day comes a simple routine. Awake. Drink. Eat if there's food. Lay down and wait to be tired again, tired enough to sleep. Thankfully I'm always tired.

Hear my angels and fear my demons, mock what petty things you've deemed so damn gorgeous. You like blood and pain but not for yourself, you enjoy it but still you say it's wrong. It is wrong for me to hurt but not wrong for you to make me do it.

This is against my nature, and I wouldn't be surprised if it's against yours too.

Creator.

Lucky for you, you'll never know for sure.

When you have a primal need stolen away from you it hurts. I want food and drink and sleep but also... other things... and it disturbs me. Before birth you see it.

Stop telling me that it's venerable. That patience is a virtue. That I am young, foolish, and that you wish you had my inexperience...

I don't know why I think this way. I get mad over trivial things, things I've never recalled anyone saying before. No one talks to me, but old memories suggest that they once did. I never liked what they had to say.

Even when they didn't speak it was painful. Perhaps even more, to be ignored. Disregarded. At least when I'm hated I exist. Being a monster is better than being nothing at all... even if it hurts.

I look up to the stands and see people. Excited families, clean clothes, good food. Basic comforts. I want them, yes, but also something *more*. I see people together. They talk together and enjoy each other's company. They're happy.

I am alone.

Also jealous. I see young couples together and... deep down... I want what they have.

I try to deny it because in the past I convinced myself that I hated them. That what they had was disgusting, that how they acted was disgusted. But it was all just a dull façade, a way of blocking out the pain, that basic need I know will never be met.

Beneath this immense shell of muscle and scales and teeth is something small. Something weak, a pale, slinking thing. It's afraid, too afraid to admit its own nature, too afraid to sate any of its desires save that which keeps it clinging to life... because it fears that once it finally works

up the courage to crawl up into the light it will be driven back down into the darkness. Again.

Deep down I'm scared. Pathetic. I just want someone who cares... someone to hold me. Someone who doesn't want me to kill things and be angry and be Obaddion. Someone who likes my art and likes the woods and likes peaceful things away from this all. But that will never happen, because I am alone. I am a monster. There are no others like me, and if there was I would be just as disgusted with them as myself. It's a desire I'll never quench, something I can never attain. Not like this.

My reflection glares at me. It hates looking up at that hideous face. Again I think of the people in the stands.

Happy.

Clean.

Together.

They have friends and families and homes and a world full of others. They're without scars, always smiling, never screaming. They aren't monsters, things to be hated.

I can't change. I'll never look like them, be like them. I can't get rid of these teeth and claws, the burning, animalistic rage that takes hold of me time after time. I can't have clean skin and clothes. I can't talk. None of these things can be remedied, yet they judge me as if they can. As if I chose to be a monster, to be an awful, hideous beast. I never wanted any of this.

Fuck your sweet sentiments.

Fuck your interpretations of sin.

Fuck this horrid body that's kept me so far away.

Fuck all of this fucking satisfaction for being yours.

Fuck every one of you for being perfect.

#

I wake up to prods and loud voices. The gate's open, and there's a train car waiting for me. It has wet floors and smells of death. Time to go, I guess.

Not a chance to get my bearings. Some are cleaning while the others herd me onboard. I forgot my doll, but they won't let me turn around and get it back. I watch one of them throw it away, and I'm sad, because it was cute... and cute things shouldn't be thrown away. Please, I can't sleep without it.

Screaming. Somewhere nearby I hear Atrox, probably being forced into a train car of its own. They must have taken it here too. Are we going back to our old cells... or somewhere else?

The door slams shut behind me, all five bolts locked into place. I sit on the floor and wait, thinking of food. They've given me kibble from time to time, but the Pale Queen was the last good meal I had. No food, just a dish of dirty water. Even now I find that I can hold out for better.

Moving. Not for long. The train stops where it stopped last time, where I shit myself.

Voices. A single, loud one, announcing things. People cheer. There's a big crowd of them, smelling of sweat and salt and other nasty human things.

A couple of children appear outside my car and start calling my name. They poke plastic toy swords and spears through the grates... miniature copies of the ones the arena robots use.

Toys. I'm just a toy. A plastic toy monster, stuffed in a box and forgotten until its owner wants to bash it around with their tanks and dinosaur figurines again. Not a living thing, not something that can feel pain.

Just a fucking toy.

I roar at them and kick the wall, shaking the entirety of my metal prison. A poor construct, just strong enough to keep me from chewing through.

They scream and run away.

“Why is he so mean?”, I hear one ask their mother.

I can’t help it. If only you knew how I feel...

“Because he’s a monster. That’s just how they are”.

I wasn’t always a monster, not until you told me that was what I had to be.

#

The mountains fly by in a few weeks of windy days and cold nights. Once they stop, and I get some kibble and fresh water. Just barely, if I peak through the grates, I can see trees.

#

A memory. They sprout up in my consciousness like new plants in spring.

Spring. Plants.

The barren void of my cell hurts more than ever before.

#

He lived the simple life of an animal. During the day he rested in his pool, wallowing in water deep enough to hide all but his vast sail, which cast shade onto the mires below. Sometimes, when it was particularly hot out, he moved out into deeper water, where the marshes became an expansive lagoon.

There was a little island in the middle of the lagoon, a mass of rotten stumps and floating logs that had congealed in a murky area of relatively shallow water and become overgrown with reeds, lilies, and small cypress trees. He would forage for ducks and geese there, ambushing them when they rested in the reeds. Duck was good, goose was better, solely because a goose was meatier than a duck. He had caught a turtle once too, but it was too small to be worth eating. Besides, he had always had a soft spot for turtles.

Other times he went out deeper and caught carp and pike. There were giant catfish in the lake, ugly fatty things that writhed in the mud and ate

anything they could catch. He only stooped to eating those in hard times, even the filthy carp were better.

If he followed the lagoon long enough, it became a swamp again, and if he cared to wade through the swamp it terminated into a wide but shallow river that flowed fast and cool into the sea. As the swamp became a river the land around changed from dense forest to salt-ravaged marsh, a labyrinth of tough, reedy grasses and lifeless mud-flats. But the sea was rich in life, and in summer months when the water was warm enough to wade in he would go there and spend the day gorging himself on crabs, mussels, and the vast stretches of kelp that dotted the shore. Kelp was good, softer than the inland shrubbery and salty in taste. The coast was free for him to explore up until about a hundred meters offshore, where it met a vast concrete wall.

Water flowed passed the wall via thick metal grates that ran along its base. Obaddion knew because he had been there. He also knew that they were too thick to chew through, because he had tried that.

The wall itself was too steep and tall to climb, and something inside him buzzed uncomfortably if he drew too close. Instinct told him that it was for the better, but he had always wondered what lay past that wall.

Then again, he did not conceive of it as a wall. It was simply an obstacle he could not overcome, and so forth he had decided to ignore it. Besides, the foodstuffs found closer to shore were far more interesting. He had caught a seal resting on the beach once, that was a good day. But exploring the waters was a pastime of warm summer days.

Under the peaceful cool of night, he left his sleeping-pool, or wherever else he had been lounging, and ventured off in search of food. He ate many things, browsing on tender shoots and foraging for nuts and berries, digging for roots and grubs. He ate honey when he could find it, honey was good. In winter he munched on bark and twigs or searched for the frozen bodies of those who perished in the cold, dark months. Throughout the whole year, he caught and killed other creatures when the

opportunity arose. The smaller ones were swallowed whole, larger prey he crippled and usually ate alive. The screams were horrible, yes, but they never fazed him. His simple, animal mind could not comprehend any suffering but his own.

Perhaps such bliss was for the best. In the colder months he would develop a hunger for meat and made kills quite frequently.

Winter. It was a forbidding time. Snow was rare, his winters were ones of perpetual dark and rain, grey landscapes of rot and decay. The light of the sun shone for only a few months a year, the rest it was overruled by the damp and dark.

He loved to swim, but only did so in the summer, when his vast form grew uncomfortably hot in the heat and drove him to spend his days resting in murky pools. His sail-pores would open up and release steam, clouds of steam drifting away in the early morning light.

During the long, dark months he was confined to land and spent his days roaming the vast forests, weaving through a maze of mossy pines and damp, decaying underbrush. On milder days he would bed down on softer parts of the forest floor, comfortable in the cool air, but the promise of frost and endless rain drove him to excavate a vast den in a hillside.

He had wintered in that den for two years until another creature drove him out. It was known as Atrox, though he had no name for it, only a mental image that brought thoughts of fear and hatred. What he did know was that it was an enemy, a threat, and his encounters with it were always painful.

He had long since excavated a new den a ways away, in a rocky hillside adorned with vast growths of ferns and old, mossy oaks. It was very wet there, and the lowlands surrounding the hill were marshy, but the forest was rich in food and a nearby river yielded many fish during certain times of the year.

The den was dry for the most part, as it went deep into the ground past the reach of the rain, and he had lined it with innumerable pine

branches. Those he liked to burrow in, a small comfort in the bitter cold. He would have dug at the surrounding hillside and used it to seal off most of the entrance, keeping him warm and hidden, but his tall spine and cumbersome form made it impossible to shrink the opening without sealing himself in.

So it was a shelter, but he was still exposed to some of winter's bitter cold. He slept throughout most of those dark months, slowing his metabolism and curling up in his den. Only when he needed to eat and drink did he force himself to leave his sanctuary.

That was his life, a simple one propelled entirely by his bestial instincts and desires. It wasn't until he set off one fall morning on a hunt that things began to change...

#

Obaddion poked his snout out of the warm, dry den and into the forest's cool, humid air. It was wet after a recent downpour, and the world around him had begun to rot. Only the ferns and conifers grew green now, the deciduous foliage of summer was rotten and battered with holes and brown stains.

A puff of steam rose from his congested nostrils, and he let out a low rumble, shifting on his great weight as he lumbered out of the den.

He mostly relied on his sight when it came to navigating. Obaddion had a bad (for an animal) sense of smell, decent hearing, and eagle eyes. He had trained them to spot small, immobile prey from a ways off, rabbits and deer the same color as the brush around them. Rabbits and deer were too fast for him to catch, of course, but his instincts compelled him to search them out anyway.

It was ingrained deeply within his mind to do such. He would stalk the little snakes and frogs he found by the marshes, and he would chase deer when he had the chance. Neither made for good food, but to hunt and stalk and chase was an undeniable urge.

But that morning he was hungry, and there was no time to chase deer. Some large creature had taken up residence in the marshy lowland forests nearby, and he wanted to find it. During his last foraging trip he had encountered a wide path of trampled brush and disturbed ground. Something had lumbered through the area, feeding on what still grew green, and it had carved out a small clearing in the forest. It had resided there for a while it seemed, as he had discovered feces both old and fresh. There were no bones or hair in them, only fibrous matter and a few nuts. It was a herbivore, and that meant it was likely a meal.

The cool air enveloped him as he shambled about, muscles and joints cracking as he strained to stretch and wake up his tired legs.

A solitary bird called out in alarm above, he ignored it. He wanted to find his potential meal and kill it so he could go back to his den and rest. A good plan, as long as he found his prey.

Obaddion had a number of trails he had carved through his range, paths of churned-up mud and flattened brush worn from his travels. When he arrived in that stretch of the little world he knew there had been no such paths, only miles of brush he had to lumber through, constantly watching for hidden pits and slick logs he could trip on. Such a fall would be bad for him, he had taken them well a few years ago but he was beginning to age, and he had grown more careful in his conduct.

Thus, he was glad for his muddy little paths through the woods. They led to all his favored spots: fields where other creatures liked to roam, the river he drank from, the swamps and lakes in which he spent his summers. But now he followed a little path off to the side, a muddy one adorned with dead, trampled cattails.

The creature had dug up reeds and other such plants, eating their roots, and there were small holes and scrape marks everywhere. It reminded him of the signs left by wild pigs and bears. Of course, the pigs rarely went near his den site now, they had learned to avoid it, and he hadn't seen a bear in months. The last bear he found was a half-grown

black bear that had attempted to escape him by climbing up a tree. Needless to say, he knocked down the tree and ate the bear.

Bear was good eating, greasy and rich in fat. He hoped his current quarry tasted the same. Perhaps it was simply an overgrown bear?

The path weaved down through the trees, adorned with the signs of its maker. The creature was easy to track, which was nice, but experience taught him that easy to track meant hard to kill. Most of the more powerful fauna he had encountered were generally not too concerned about concealing their presence, unless they needed to hide from their prey.

Something stirred, and the noise interrupted his thoughts. His ears perked up, catalyzed by the unmistakable creaking noise of a tree being toppled down. It landed with a crash, and Obaddion lowered his stance and began to move slowly, watching more carefully. It sounded as if it had come from the clearing he had seen earlier, the one he supposed was the creature's den site.

Here his vast sail was a handicap, it caught itself on branches and made it hard to hide. But the effort still made a difference, at least he wasn't fully in view as he slunk through the trampled brush.

His nose wrinkled back at the pungent stench of feces, a foul odor flowing up from the clearing below. He was following a small slope down into the lowland woods, and already the creature's defecations were annoying his senses. At least it was too cold for the flies that would otherwise swarm such an area, nasty biting things that picked at his open wounds and crawled on his face.

Again came the sound of a falling tree, and his thoughts ceased as his mind again became enveloped in the hunt. He caught sight of something moving below, a bulky green shape shambling around in the clearing.

There it was, breakfast.

He salivated hungrily at the thought of it, watching carefully as he descended the hill and stalked towards the clearing. The creature below

was oblivious, tearing off branches from a small, newly-toppled tree and forcing them into its mouth, grunting as it mowed down the tough fodder.

It was an odd sight, and a new one at that, he noticed as he watched the beast.

His potential meal was sitting squat on the ground, two pillar-like legs sprawled outwards, terminating in feet like an ape's. Its body was large and bulky, a sickly greyish green, the back littered with small bony knobs. It was hunched in posture, much like himself, the muscular neck lowered slightly below the shoulders and terminating in a squarish head with powerful jaws and small ears. The creature's arms were massive and muscular, longer than its legs, tipped in thick but dexterous finger digits, these also like an ape's. As it turned its head, searching out another branch to gnaw on, he could see its head was very much like an ape's as well, only far thicker and deep-set, with small, dull eyes and massive nostrils that went from the forehead downwards. It had a slight underbite, with the powerful but dull canine teeth sticking out from below, yellowed and worn from constant use. It could be likened to an ogre or troll, only Obaddon could not conceptualize fantasy creatures and merely thought of it as a possible meal.

He slunk downwards, apprehensive but still hungry. The creature's unfamiliarity warranted caution, but its bulky mass was undoubtedly rich in the fat he craved to build up his winter layers.

The ogre, meanwhile, had grown tired of tree branches and had risen up, shambling towards a nearby thicket. He walked unsteadily on his hind limbs and quickly reverted back to all fours, walking like a gorilla as he made his way to the thicket to dig for tubers in the cold, muddy soil.

His massive forelimbs were excellent for the task, scraping and heaving away the ground as he tore up crunchy, nutrient-rich roots and gnawed on them, grinding them up with his yellowed teeth. His sharp canines were primarily for defense, as the only meat in his diet was carrion. He was a large creature, about the size of a small elephant, and

completely unaware of the shadowy form slinking down from above, stalking behind him, watching hungrily.

He was new to the area, having moved down from the hills up north. There, he had no threats, all the predators were far smaller than he, and he expected the same of his new residence in the lowland forests.

Obaddion was close now, trembling with nervous energy, fear of a failed hunt, but almost dumbfounded at his quarry's obliviousness. It had never once turned to check its back, mindlessly eating away, tearing up the ground in search of roots. He was fond of roots himself, but they paled in comparison to the heap of flesh before him. He licked his cracked lips in anticipation, his mind flooding with images of meat, memories of its taste. He had eaten mostly plants since the plentiful summer, now it was time to feast.

With a burst of adrenaline he charged forward, heavy feet thumping on the ground. The ogre snorted and turned, startled to see him as he launched himself forward, only visible for a split second before he grabbed hold of the back of his quarry's thick neck and yanked down. Bellowing nasally, the hulking behemoth struggled, striking at Obaddion's sides as he yanked down on its neck, drawing it closer to his gaping maw. He bit down, and the ogre let out a pained snort, breathing heavily as he forced it down and circled behind it. He was slowly overpowering it, forcing his tired body to resist the harsh blows from the creature's muscular arms.

The ogre let out a nasally shriek now, panicked as its aggressor wrestled it down and circled away from its arms and out of reach. Obaddion pinned down its right leg with his foot, driving it into the muddy ground as he pierced the ogre's sides with his claws, driving them through the thick skin and into the soft abdomen. It shrieked again, writhing and pawing at the ground, struggling to free its neck from Obaddion's jaws.

Its neck was too thick to be crushed, but it could be torn. Big cats bite down on the jugular of their prey, not Obaddion. He simply began to tear

away at the thick, muscular flesh, driving his talons into his screaming victim's sides as he ripped away pieces of its neck, jaws dripping with red blood. The ogre's neck was red and raw now, and it let out a final, pained below as Obaddion gnawed away at the thick flesh and crushed its spine.

The forest grew silent, and his quarry was dead. He licked his lips in satisfaction, grunted as he pulled his claws free of the dead ogre's sides and flipped it over onto its back, stomach exposed. It was a successful hunt, and he would eat well that day.

He began to bite at the fleshy mass, tearing it open with his claws and pulling apart the skin. He gnawed on the fat lining the inside of the ogre's thick hide, feasting on yellow fat and chewing on the tough skin. Then he tore out the kidneys and ate those, proceeding to toss aside the liver and intestines. The stomach came next, a wonderful mixture of meat and fermented plant matter. After that he ate the heart, a tough, unpleasant organ that required a great deal of chewing to process. He ended up reducing it to a pulpy mass and gulping it down whole.

Then he began to eat away at the flesh lining the ribs, red muscle and greasy fat, gnawing at the bones and tearing away strips of red meat. Gruesome to others, it was a veritable banquet for him, a well-earned meal. He ate his fill, licked his scarred lips clean, and set off for a drink, belly swollen from his huge meal. He would return later to stash his kill somewhere safe.

The river that flowed through and around his stretch of forest was only a short walk away, and it was clear and clean. Little pools and mires abounded in the woodlands, but they were breeding grounds for flies in the summer and muddy reservoirs full of dead leaves in the winter. He always drank from the river, and in the fall he could catch fish in it when they swam upstream to spawn. As he broke through the trees and shambled out onto the muddy, tree-enclosed bank, memories of glistening, sweet fish came to mind. He took a good long drink, and then images of red meat took place of the fish, reminding him of the task at hand.

The lowland forests were more wetland than forest in many places, the old, mossy trees and thickets giving way to grey lakes shimmering in the morning sun, steaming rising up off of streams and pools, trickling waterfalls flowing down rocky cliffs. He lumbered along one of his muddy trails, peering through the thickets and watching a few ducks as they foraged in a nearby pond. Normally he would chase them, but the knowledge of a better meal kept him on his path.

He preferred that moist, cool expanse to the pine forests of the hills. Vast, ancient trees grew up out of the soggy ground, old mossy oaks that seemed black and spindly in the grey winter skies. Leafless thickets of shrubs sprouted between them, parted by ferns and muddy depressions in the ground. Little birds flitted around in the trees above, darting through the morning mists. It was peaceful, peaceful and cool, and he liked it.

Gnarled jaws still dripping from his drink, he passed through the shrubbery and into the clearing where his meal lay, waiting. A trio of crows had been picking at it while he was gone, they quickly fluttered off as he lumbered towards the carcass and began to feed, tearing out great mouthfuls of flesh and gulping them down. He ate the fat mostly, precious fat, fat to keep him warm, fat to fuel his excursions. Obaddion was simple in mind, but still smart enough to know that other creatures would eat the fat if he didn't first. It was a valued commodity.

The cool dawn had given way to a murky midday by the time he finished. Heaving up the ragged, steaming carcass, he made his way back up the path to his cave, followed by the crows, who eyed his meal hungrily but kept a watchful distance.

Mud coated his feet, cold mud that stuck to the webbed skin between his toes and worked its way into his wrinkles and scales. The mud coated the ragged remains of the ogre, staining the green hide and red flesh a murky brown. Obaddion thought little of the change. It was still food, and good food at that.

It had begun to grow a little darker by the time he made it out of the stinking ogre-trail and back into his lair. The great trees had become ominous, shadowy structures, adorned with the hunched forms of waiting crows, the only birds that really seemed to thrive in those colder months.

He settled down in the dark, enveloping gloom of his den, the dead ogre lying in a heap next to him. Obaddion peered lazily into the world outside his little cave, a grey, cold world of trees and poles, aching for the return of the sun. Gnawing on the ogre's squarish head, he watched the grey skies turn red, and fade into black. Then he slept.

#

The next few days, Obaddion mostly rested in his cave, drifting in and out of sleep as the crows picked at the last few scraps of his meal. A raven arrived and displaced them, and the struggle woke up Obaddion long enough to drive them off, gnaw on the head a bit more, and drift back into a lazy, well-fed sleep.

As he did, it rained, day and night, a steady downpour that soaked the ground and drenched the trees. The crows eventually left, roosting in the relative cover of old pines while the rain pattered away.

Obaddion was sluggishly watching the rain, eyes half-closed. It was forming little puddles on the forest floor, muddying the trails he had worn down, soaking the green moss and dead leaves. There was little left of the ogre's carcass now, only ragged skin and bits of decaying muscle. He had tossed away the head earlier that day, having eaten off of it all that he could. Now, he gnawed on one of the ogre's bones, hoping to crack the thick limb to get at the marrow inside.

It was a nice, relaxed afternoon, and he was content to rest in his cave and gnaw away, safe and sheltered from the incessant rain. A splash sounded from outside, and he tensed up.

Something was stalking down one of his little paths, sloshing in the mud. His ears perked up, his eyes widened. Yes, something was moving

around outside his den, barely noticeable in the noisy downpour. He lifted his head up, licking his one good tusk as he listened and waited.

Food? Maybe it was food. Maybe it was a nice, fat bear, or another ogre. Fresh meat sounded good, better than ragged skin and bones.

A gnarled, elongate snout poked past the entrance of his cave, and Obaddion realized that it was no food.

The snout was upturned and beaklike, ridged in texture. Its owner moved forward, revealing a long, bony head with long, curved jaws. The mouth opened up, ever so slightly, to reveal several rows of conical teeth on the lower jaw. Uttering a low, raspy hiss, the creature drew closer, stepping back and turning to face inside the cave. The rain pattered in the background, splashing against its brown, muscular form.

It was a Glutton, a large predator he had seen a few times before, but never in the lowlands. Gluttons were aggressive brutes, pure carnivores who ambushed large prey in the hills and chased down Mastodons in the steppes.

He had never been fond of them, they attacked head-first and boasted a painful bite. His last encounter with one had terminated in a broken wrist that took months to heal.

The Glutton caught sight of him, white eyes bulging, black pupils growing large. It let out a short, rasping bark, then turned its attentions to the remnants of the ogre, flicking out a long, black tongue that brushed the decaying flesh ever so slightly.

Obaddion rose up a little, letting out a low rumble, tail swishing like a cat's.

The Glutton barked again, lowering its huge head to nudge the carcass with its snout. Obaddion shifted a little closer, hissing. Paying him no heed, the rival predator opened up its bony, beaklike jaws and snagged the ragged carcass, lifting it up. Obaddion bellowed angrily and lunged forward, snatching a dangling strip of flesh in his jaws and pulling

backwards. The Glutton tensed up and began to pull back too, stepping back out of the cave into the rain, jaws gripping its prize firmly.

Obaddion backed deeper into his den, scabbed lips pulled backward in a snarl, teeth clamped firmly on the ragged flesh.

His rival grunted and gave a sharp jerk, tearing a good chunk of the meat free. It backed away, gulping the flesh down, then moved forward again and attempted to snag the rest of the carcass, which Obaddion quickly moved to protect. The Glutton encroached further, opening its jaws wide in an effort to fend him off, the rows of teeth seeming a sickly yellow in the dim cave.

Obaddion opened his jaws in response, baring his sharp canines and curved tusk. The other tusk had been snapped off in a fight long ago, but he still had one, and it could leave a brutal wound.

The Glutton lunged forward, snapping at him and forcing Obaddion back. He turned, facing the intruder with his tail, swinging it back and forth like a vast, heavy whip. It hit the Glutton in the face, causing it to stagger backwards, unsteady on its pillar-like limbs.

Obaddion swung his tail again, but this time the Glutton managed to right itself and lunged for the tip of his tail, biting down and crushing the bone. Obaddion shrieked and attempted to wriggle free, but the beast's bite was firm, and with a sharp, backwards tug, the Glutton tore off a good meter or so of his tail, sending out a spray of red blood. It stepped back, grunting hoarsely as it gulped down its prize, jaws slick with blood. Obaddion writhed around, shrieking loudly as he bled. The Glutton sniffed the moist air and snatched up the remains of his ogre carcass, shambling out of the cave and back into the rainy world outside, dripping with blood.

Obaddion collapsed, nursing the fleshy, torn tip of his tail. It burned with raw, incessant pain, throbbing worse than any previous injuries he could remember. A couple of vertebrae remained, protruding out of the mangled flesh, deformed by the Glutton's bite. One of the creature's teeth

had torn loose and was now imbedded in the bone, a little something to remember it by.

Outside, the rain pattered on, the world indifferent.

#

If it were not for the bitter chill of winter, Obaddion would have surely died to an infection. But it was a small blessing, as his tail ached and throbbed for many days and many weeks, and he had to take care to avoid brushing it against trees and stones when he set off in search of food.

More than once, the mangled vertebrae at the end had gotten caught on a tree branch or tangled thicket, resulting in a painful, frustrating struggle. He hated going out and risking such incidents, but it was cold, and he was burning enormous amounts of calories just to stay warm.

His internal furnace commanded a great amount of food, and Obaddion was forced to set out and find it, despite the constant rain and cold and the throbbing in his tail.

He had relegated himself to munching dry stems and pinecones one foggy morning, following a path well beyond his cave and the surrounding forests, shambling beneath massive firs and pines. The trees bled with sap, which he enjoyed, licking up the fresh stuff and gnawing at the dry sap the coated the thick bark.

Sap was good, almost as good as honey, and it provided a temporary distraction from the pain in his tail.

He had devoted a good hour or so to finding sap and pinecones when a waft of warm steam brushed his face.

It was startling, warmth in that cold air, and it provoked his simple curiosity. He sniffed, forcing down the mucus that congealed in his nostrils, and turned to see that a small cloud of steam had enveloped the pine grove he was foraging in.

Exhaling slowly, he followed the steam, the warm cloud forming droplets on his vast form.

The steam cloud flowed upwards from a lower area a little ways from the pines. It was moist ground, packed mud interspaced with a number of great stones and boulders, mossy and covered in dew. Obaddion had trouble navigating through the slick rocks and took care to keep his tail raised above the stones to avoid getting it caught.

It was an unsteady path, but the comforting warmth of the steam beckoned him onwards. A solitary raven called from above, letting out deep caws as it sat perched in a mossy tree, a veritable giant compared to the nearby crows.

He watched it for a few seconds, eying the shadowy bird, then turned back to his path through the stones.

It was not long before he moved into a small clearing walled in by vast, mossy formations of stone. Great old trees grew in between, spindly branches bare in the dead of winter.

Situated in the center of the clearing was a bubbling pool, alive with the ripples and contortions of the water, sending up great clouds of steam. A number of dead leaves had congealed along its shores, muddy shores packed down with footprints of numerous past visitors.

Obaddion sniffed the warm air, tired eyes widening at the sight. It seemed warm, comfortable, beckoning. He eyed the footprints on the ground. Bear. And elk. They seemed old.

With slow, cautious steps he drew near the pool, enveloping his form in the warm steam. The water bubbled before him, rippling and splashing. Crows cawed loudly in the trees above.

He lifted his foot cautiously, slowly lowering it until the tip of his toes touched the water. It was warm, unnaturally warm, but not so much that it burned him. He set his foot down, letting the warmth flow along his scarred feet, washing the mud from his aching toes. It felt good, and he moved forward, sliding slowly into the pool, letting the warm waters bubble and flow around him.

It was a hot spring. This he did not know, it was simply warm water to him, but his caution had been replaced with a sense of relaxation and comfort. He moved past the masses of floating leaves into the bubbling center and floated there, letting only his head, part of his sail, and the tip of his tail rise above the waters.

The comforting warmth reminded him of how tired he was, and his eyelids lowered as he began to drift off, drowsy but still awake. He had abandoned his usual, watchful stance, but he felt safe, sheltered by the great stones, warm in his strange pool.

He rested there much of the afternoon, only stirring to raise his head above the surface and survey the landscape around him, then dipping down again to rest.

Birds flitted in the trees above, crows arguing in their harsh voices, little songbirds eagerly competing over seeds and insects. A hawk glided past, scattering the songbirds and sending the crows into a mad rage. They swooped up from their perches and pursued the bird of prey, cawing and making mock dives until it left the area. Obaddion watched quietly, soaking in the hot spring.

He was beginning to drift off into sleep when a noise sounded through the trees, breaking his peaceful stupor and sending the crows into another noisy conversation. It was deep and loud, a great rumbling, and instinct told him that this was bad. Instinct told him to run.

Run he did, up and out of the pool in a flurry of frothing, steaming water. Scrambling up over the rocks and past the trees without so much as a backwards glance until he was in his cave.

Home again, home again. He felt safe in the cave, it was his fortress. Things shouldn't be able to hurt him there, he should be safe, safe from whatever made the great rumbling.

Hours passed, and there was no further sign of danger. Obaddion was once again reminded of how tired he was, and, forgetting about the rumbling, settled down on the cave floor and rested his head.

In no time at all, he had begun to drift off into a nice, gentle rest. It had begun to rain, a gentle rain that pitter-pattered against the ferns and the trees, trickling down the emerald boughs of the great pines outside his cave. A lovely rain against the pines, soothing him into sleep.

Unbeknownst to him, it was the last time he would ever sleep in that excellent little cave.

#

“Obaddion Version 1954. The first, and last, of its kind”.

“That’s the one outfitted with the new organ models, right?”.

“Right. It has a Version 3.1 heart and lungs and a 3.1 digestive system as well. We’ll implant the fighting brainpiece in a few hours, and it’ll be the finest Obaddion yet”.

“Too bad we can’t make it huge like in the show”.

“Square-Cube Law’s a bitch”.

“This’ll be easier on the budget. We won’t have to replace its organs as much, not at least until they start sending it out for fights”.

“The regenerative ability is remarkable. When we first captured it, it was missing the tip of its tail from a fight. Now the wound’s almost healed”.

“They have other experimental models with the new organs, right?”.

“A few. Gluttons, an Atrox, a few ogres. They free-range them for now to see how long they last with their current builds. For the Gluttons it’s a year or two at best, and the Atrox is on its last legs.. But Version 1954’s been out there for five years and is still kicking”.

Chapter Seven

Unwanted Rematch

“System failure! The numbing restraints aren’t activating!”.

Obaddion snapped free of the tubes embedded in his arms and howled, thrashing his broken body against the bars and wires pinning him down and smacking equipment with his tail.

Another organ transplant.

This time, he woke up too early.

They had cut him open and plugged opaque plastic arteries into his flesh, pumping it with fluid, hydrating new organs until they could be properly assimilated. A tarp hung from the ceiling, keeping his spilled intestines from touching the laminate below.

He looked at the disembodied mess he considered himself and screamed.

#

I shat blood and vomited piss.

Nothing about me is natural.

Yet they expect me to go out there and fight. Again.

#

He walked slowly. The drink really didn’t energize him like it used to. Now he was tired, with even days of rest not alleviating his broken body. Perhaps one was supposed to be tired, and he was merely weak and lazy, but he never remembered being so broken for this long back in the wilderness. There had been pain and cruelty, but also peace and beauty. Most of all, he had been innocent. Now his eyes had been opened, and he had begun to realize how horrible he was. The Pale Queen’s screams resonated in his head alongside all the other animals he had ever killed and eaten.

Almost as if he were hearing them, bad memories made into flesh, and they sounded so real, so vivid. He passed out of the dark tunnel and into the light, awaiting his fate.

It was a screaming, writhing monstrosity savage to the point where even Obaddion was appalled. Atrox, reeking of the aura of something that wanted to hurt him. He stiffened at the sight of it, remembering seeing his insides piled up like discarded pie filling. Such a faint memory, his mind so much... so much duller. With his newfound intelligence it seemed, almost, as if he had never really fought Atrox before.

I better get some fish for this.

He knew he would get nothing.

Atrox let out a horrible scream and snapped loose from its chains. There was no time to react as the skin-pink humanoid launched itself at him and slashed three deep, bloody gashes across his arm. Obaddion stumbled back, spine bumping into the wall, and he barely managed to turn and whip Atrox across the face with his tail.

The creature was obviously a grappler, for in an instant it had leaped over him and began wrestling face to face. Clawed hands dug into his neck and shoulders, sinking deep into the bloody meat and ripping it free. Atrox moved back, Obaddion followed, and he quickly realized that it was a mistake when Atrox yanked him downwards and face-first into the ground.

It had known, he realized, hearing a guttural laugh from above as Atrox began biting at his flanks and slamming bony arms into his stomach with resonating thuds. Atrox had been purposely trying to throw him off balance. It was smart.

It was like him.

Atrox let out a blood-curdling scream and began trying to twist him into a pretzel.

Maybe.

Obaddion kicked the creature in the face, struggling to his feet in desperate fear of being eviscerated, having but a moment before his opponent was in his face again, biting his neck and trying to yank him down. He coughed up a bit of blood and clamped down on Atrox's bony cheek, teeth puncturing deep into the tough flesh.

Atrox let go and screamed, slashing Obaddion across the face and stumbling back. Obaddion screamed and wished (not for the first time) that he could put curses into words.

Now they were both bloody and circling each other, glaring and breathing open-mouthed. Without eyes Atrox was pretty unreadable in a menacing sort of way, but it did not take much to see it was re-thinking its attack plan. Or perhaps that was merely Obaddion hoping for a monster with thoughts alike to his, for some semblance of another like him. Anything to not be alone.

The crowd goaded them on boisterously. It was a brutal fight, and they were drawn to the gore like flies to dead flesh. Obaddion glared at them, but only for a second before meeting Atrox again in a brutal grapple. His opponent's hide was slick and rubbery, making it hard to gain hold of, and as such Obaddion's claws scrambled on the thick skin without hope of purchase. He decided that his jaws were better offensive weapons and bit down hard on Atrox's bicep. The pale monster promptly returned the favor, biting his forelimb and trying to tear it loose. Obaddion screamed and began thwacking Atrox's flanks with his tail. It worked well.

Not well enough.

Again Atrox threw him to the floor but this time was met with a hard thwack to the face. It deterred it momentarily, long enough for Obaddion to scramble back up and back down on Atrox's leg. There was a horrible scream, and soon they were writhing around and slashing and biting wherever they could, a savage ouroboros of frothing dragons.

Adrenaline had fully taken hold now, the two combatants scrambling to gain an advantage over each other with near unrivaled savagery. Atrox leapt atop Obaddion, clinging to the great sail with one arm and slashing his flanks with the other. Obaddion stooped forward, causing Atrox to lean over him far enough that he could grab its arm and slam it on the ground with a satisfying thud.

Landing on its back, Atrox managed a quick roll to its belly before Obaddion was on it, sinking tusks and teeth into the muscular hump on its back, pinning its legs with his feet. Atrox screamed and struggled upwards, slashing at Obaddion's face to deter him.

Obaddion managed a harsh bellow and pummeled Atrox back to the ground, biting at his opponent's neck as the pale savage slashed at his. Crocodile jaws gripped firm with blunted teeth, soon Obaddion was dragging his opponent around and bashing it against the ground.

Atrox was not one to be manhandled, however, and soon he felt two sets of claws digging into his chest, aided by painful kicks from the creature's feet. He screamed, and in an instant his opponent had barreled free and was attacking from behind, biting on his flanks and dragging him backwards.

Each time you fight you die. Bleeding everywhere like a fresh corpse. Only to awake again, barely alive and just able to keep going. The flies swarmed around Obaddion, irritated by the fight and driven from their homes in his scars and pores. They were a black cloud, harbingers of decay circling their little world.

Feed my pretties. Sate yourselves upon my flesh, drink my blood for it is my gift to you. Don't worry, there will be more.

Atrox screamed as it pummeled his aching form, each blow breaking his body beyond what he ever conceived it could handle. No mercy for the monster, no sympathy. Everyone cheered, and he hated them for it as he began vomiting blood, blood on the ground, blood in his throat, blood splattering on Atrox's face.

Now he was up, a purposeful glare on his bulging eyes. His tail swished behind him, sweeping in a great violent arc and striking Atrox across the face. It made impact with a loud smack, and the monster let out an agonized screech as Obaddion made ready to strike again. This time his opponent was ready, and he felt the meat hook claws sinking into the flesh of his tail.

Then he flew, Atrox dragging him along the ground at first and then gaining momentum, lifting him off the ground and hurling him away and just over the wall so that he collided with the invisible electric forcefield protecting the audience from their captive entertainers.

There was a loud, terrible crackling as Obaddion's body shocked and convulsed, sparking with electricity. He would have fallen back down and perhaps gotten up, but Atrox was quick to leap up and repeatedly smash him against the forcefield, sticky feet clinging to the vertical wall with ease. Obaddion screamed, each blow shocking him worse than the last, not killing him but showing him very well what death could be like. He wanted to resist, but the shock was overwhelming, and Atrox was in a frenzy of enraged sadism as it slammed him over and over and screeched alike to the sparks and spitting wires of its containment.

A burst of energy sparked up like sudden hellfire, giving Obaddion one last terrible shock before the lights flickered off and there was darkness.

For all intents and purposes he was a blackened corpse, bumpy scar tissue singed like charcoal, body limp like a dead fish. Atrox loomed over him, he could hear its breath and feel the sonar clicks it surely used to navigate.

The violence had ended, it seemed. Atrox was standing still, no longer preoccupied with attacking. Obaddion lay weak atop the wall, able to do nothing but breathe, body commanding him against all will and reason to live...

Atop the wall. He was on the wall. If he, in his dazed near-dead state, could recollect, the forcefield was directly atop the wall. You couldn't go up there without being shocked. He knew because when he fought the snake monster months earlier, he had thrown its decapitated head against it to see if there was some kind of barrier. There *was*.

The power had gone out. The electric wall was gone.

Once again, he wondered if Atrox was smart, if this had been planned. Probably not, or the creature wouldn't be standing there in the same dumbfounded shock as he.

Hushed, panicked voices circulated through the darkness as Obaddion slowly struggled to his feet. He was *free*. For now and from the arena, at least. Free from his horrid body, no. Free from his confusion and mental agony, no. But free from that bloody arena.

As the lights flickered on he looked upon humanity with wide eyes, cracked lips slowly curling up into a sly, twisted grin as he realized there was nothing between him and a violent revenge. Atrox seemed to know the same, making noises that could almost be described as a childish sort of delight as it looked upon its former captors. Then it opened its mouth and hissed, a deep, seemingly satisfied hiss.

The two monsters turned to each other and exchanged nods, forgoing their battle in favor of the greater enemy, the one who tortured them and mocked them and made them so.

It was the closest thing to understanding Obaddion had ever experienced.

There was a scream, whether from man or beast he did not know, but in an instant multiple bodies decorated the bleachers, strewn amidst trash and junk food scraps. Atrox was in a violent rage, tearing seats from the stands and tossing them, slashing anything in its path and flinging scarlet innards like party streamers.

Obaddion turned to the screaming masses as they fled or sat in frozen shock, wheezing as blood drizzled from his teeth, opened mouthed to sate

air-starved lungs. Then he roared, a grating terrible sound in pure fury over his treatment at their pathetic hands.

I was the last of my kind, and you made me the first.

I was innocent, and you made me wicked.

I was free, and you confined me.

That is why I shall punish you.

Because I never thought I could be more alone.



Quake and tremble, for the captive beast is loose. Obaddion was on the panicked throng in a frenzy of pent-up rage, grabbing people in his jaws and crushing others underfoot. None were favored, for man and

woman and child were alike to the product of their cruelty: enemies to be destroyed. He did not think of it as murder, or unjust, for they had tortured him and watched his suffering with glee. Now he was simply repaying the favor, tearing one in half while stepping on another.

Atrox let out another scream, grabbing a handful of children and stuffing them down its greedy maw. The teeth sunk deep into soft meat and scarlet red, overjoyed in doing what they had been made to do.

Each death only fueled the monsters and their bloodlust, reminding them of their past freedom, their fallen brothers, ages in agony and isolation with no hope of light.

In desperation people were jumping off the stands into the crevices below, landing with ugly splats on concrete or broken amidst metal pipes. Others swarmed down narrow passageways like ants, condensed masses that made easy prey for a couple of monstrous predators. Humanity was shocked to have the tables turned, technology failed, reminded of a past when their ancestors were food for savage beasts. They did not take it well.

Now there was the need to escape, past the prison and the world of concrete and steel and back into fresh air and sunlight. Obaddion searched the walls and bleachers, hoping for a way out, but all were meant for people and thus too small for him. He licked the blood from his lips and hissed.

A scraping sound came to his ears, and he turned to see Atrox scrabbling up a wall towards a vast slanted window. There were four in the massive building, for building it was, one on each side of the arena. They let in a bit of pale light, but it was negated by the artificial sun-mockery of the arena. Obaddion looked towards the light with hopeful eyes nonetheless, watching as Atrox smashed one of the windows and tore aside shards of glass, screaming angrily as they cut its hands. After a frustrated struggle the beast climbed up and out, leaving pale daylight to shine into the darkness.

Obaddion wheezed, pained and exhausted now that his rage was over but so very desperate for the day, for the sky, for anything but his confines. He tore loose a massive section of bleachers and dragged it along, denting the metal with his teeth as he positioned it between the stands and the wall leading to the window, a stairway to freedom. He was reminded of a story where a prophet of sorts glimpsed a stairway leading up to the heavens, traversed by angels, and though he did not know what they looked like he yearned to see angels for himself. Something told him they were beautiful, and he thought of clear streams and sunrises and all the other sights he had treasured from his past. A nervous pause, and then he clambered up his makeshift stairway, stepping past the broken glass and into the light.

Atrox was there, standing on its hind legs near the edge of the roof, looking out solemnly into the greyscape of mankind. It clicking quietly but rapidly all the same, taking in the vast convoluted cityscape and its towers and monoliths and the miles of steel and artificial light and trash. The skies were dull and grey with smoke and pale steam.

There was no sign of any forests or mountains or anything remotely alike to the world Obaddion loved, and he looked upon the abomination that was humanity's creation with weary, disappointed eyes.

So far to go. It was unlikely that he'd make it. They'd come with their prods and likely worse things and put him back in the cell. Or perhaps just kill him, but he doubted that they would do him such kindness.

He couldn't bear the thought of sitting alone in a concrete cube, barely alive and forced to go on, unable to stop the pain. No. Not again. He didn't have the will to last much longer, not after his fight with Atrox.

If it weren't for the tiny hope of return to his old life, he would have given up then and there, rested his screaming legs. But scream as they might he had to keep going, so maybe once more he could hear the rain on the pines.

He was atop a very large, very tall building surrounded by flats of concrete with cars and trucks and beyond that there were many more buildings. The parking lots, as they were called, were full of screaming people hurrying to their cars like rats caught raiding a cellar. Atrox was already upon them, leaving a trail of bodies in its wake, and from his bird's eye view Obaddion could see a good number of armored people in vehicles with very long prods and all sorts of other weapons that he didn't recognize.

Higher reasoning told him it'd be a good idea to take a different route.

Chapter Eight

Cruel Sentience

If I recall correctly, people can't handle the elements like animals can. For all their pride over "adaptability", they can't survive anywhere besides the lush tropics unless they have access to secure, comfy, heated homes and clothes and all sorts of mass-produced food that most of them couldn't competently grow themselves.

Put a person in the woods I came from with nothing but the clothes on their back and they'll die within the week. They couldn't even drink the water there without getting sick. I'd crap in it just to be sure that they did.

Odd then that humanity was given dominion over the beasts. The weak rule the strong in a sense, lofty in their technology without knowledge of the beauty of simple living and the summer sun and spring rain.

It goes without saying that people are cruel, unjust rulers. I have a faint idea of how they treat each other, which is poor in itself. They treat animals even worse. Even the smart ones, like apes and dolphins. There aren't many of those left, which is probably why I've never seen either aside from once on TV, and the show was talking about how people were killing them off. Dogs, treasured as "man's best friends", they too are mistreated. Not that I care. I hate dogs. They always barked at me while I waited in the train.

So anyways, if people abuse something bred purely to be a lovable companion, how much crueller are they to something bred to be a monster?

I didn't get far the other day. There's something inside me, a little device that knocks you out if you get loose. The electrical shock shut it down just long enough for me to taste a bit of vengeance.

I passed out and awoke back in the cell with nothing gained but wounds from Atrox and the knowledge that I am surrounded by the abomination of urban sprawl.

The people are mad. I don't blame them, I'm still picking bits of the audience from my teeth. Children taste better than adults, but not by much. Pork is much better. Fish is infinitely so. I don't think I'll be getting any fish soon though.

Like I said, I don't blame them for being mad. Their electric wall is wrecked, they'll have to fix that before fights begin again, at least in that arena. I killed at least a few dozen, but I don't regret it, just as they undoubtedly don't regret what they've done to me. I wouldn't expect them to take it well.

That being said, they've been punishing me, hitting me with the prods just because and leaving me without water. My throat is dry and aching, I can't turn my head without it hurting. My skin is stiff and dead, covered in red scabs from Atrox. Those claws fucking hurt.

People seem to have a poor sense of justice.

They punish me for what I've done, binding me to their rules and morals. It's wrong in their eyes to take human life. If I was one of them I'd think the same way.

But I am not human. I am a monster.

Killing them is no different to me than killing any other animal.

Why bind me to your morals and rules, punish me for violating them, if I cannot be treated equal to you in other aspects? Let me live free, work for pay and reside in a house, and then I will subject myself to your rules. Treat me as a person and I will embrace your morals. Then I will consider taking human life to be murder and not merely slaughtering pests.

But that will never happen, because I am a monster and they are people. It was decided that I was awful and to be despised before we even met.

We're all meat in the long run. Meat to grow, meat to die, meat to rot. Everything that breathes is just carbon and other things arranged, albeit, in a unique way. Meat blackens in the fire just like wood. Everything shares the same basic problems of survival and procreation. I know of reproduction but cannot do so myself... at least make more Obaddions that is. Perhaps it is because I am not a species, I am a product of mankind. Maybe they made me.

It wouldn't be surprising.

Just as they made the monsters on the screen, so did they monsters in flesh. Monsters to fight and die, fictional antagonists made real. I am the living embodiment of their TV villains, bloodthirsty, hideous, ugly beast. Why then do I think other things? Why do I see beauty and feel pain? Perhaps they enjoy the suffering.

There seems to be an urge to bind things by labels and rules and names. But that isn't always how it is naturally. The trees in the forest never grew in straight lines, but wherever they could. The woods were a labyrinth of different plants, unorganized and unique, and that is part of what made them beautiful. You can name things and define things but it is never perfect.

Crocodiles look like lizards but are phylogenetically more related to birds. They're both archosaurs alongside the pterosaurs and dinosaurs. I was made to look like a dinosaur, *Spinosaurus aegyptiacus*. Dinosaurs were animals, though, long-gone and spared from coexistence with humanity. I am not an animal, animals don't know words like that.

Before I wished there were others of my kind. Now I hope with all my heart that I am alone, that there are no other Obaddions who suffer like me. But the loneliness hurts all the same. Maybe it is because there is an innate need for companionship, one I never recognized back in the woods.

Meat to grow and meat to die and meat to rot.

I hate being bound to flesh, controlled by urges to sleep and eat and avoid pain. It conflicts with my higher nature at times, which I wish I

didn't have. For all their complexity people are just meat, meat that is capable of being depressed and starting wars and making all the weird shit I see on TV. They still eat and crap and make more meat that grows up to do the same thing. But when they die the worms eat them like they eat me now. The flies don't care.

Animals don't understand these things. Animals are innocent. Animals are blissful.

The world should be left to them, those who can enjoy life for what it offers and not aspire to something beyond, something that probably doesn't exist. Animals can eat and sleep and procreate and be fine with it. Animals don't contemplate their suffering, their purpose. Animals don't understand evil. Even the smarter ones are no better off than children, and nasty little goblins though they are, children have nowhere near the understanding of an adult.

I was like that once. I ate and slept and drank and enjoyed nature. I didn't hate myself. I didn't understand suffering. There was joy in the sun and the rain, hot summers and cold winters. All experienced simply, for what they were and without worry about things that didn't matter and complexities that distracted one from simple purposes. Of course there was pain and death, but it was never as vivid as now.

Yet at times I think it is weakness to yearn for that animal bliss. To desire ignorance in favor of knowledge, however painful. Understanding hurts but at least I can see the world more clearly, describe my experiences. Besides, pain refines. After the first time I got a mouthful of porcupine quills I never bothered them again. Pain helps you learn, like how all the fights have taught me, to, well, be better at fighting. Or at least more resilient. I must admit I don't really have any moves, my brain's too slow and clumsy to understand those.

Paintings need painters and sculptures need sculptors.

I desire a creator who takes pride in me. I don't want to be the wayward product of mindless evolution, or some flux in creation. I don't

want to be just a plaything of humanity designed for violence and nothing more. I can hardly bear it, yet it seems to be the most likely scenario. Is there something beyond meat? Is there someone who hears these thoughts, who understands me?

I want to ascend, if that's even possible and not just the product of my dissatisfaction with life. I've been in flesh long enough and it's unpleasant. I'm tired. My body is tired, it can't carry me much longer. The pleasures of food and sleep aren't enough to keep me going.

Every morning I wake up, look to the ceiling and groan. I can't stand the day and the faces of people and the prods. More and more now I'm angry, with nothing to take it out on. There was that one day, the one where I finally paid them back, but not in full. Those people died quickly. Mine is slow, I would trade places with them any day.

I'm running of reasons to keep going.

A mechanical whirr, and the TV turns on. There's the flying turtle fighting an alien with a knife for a head, a movie I've seen before. I wonder if they're trying to brainwash me by playing all these stupid old monster movies, make me like the nuke dinosaur. If so it's working, just like him I hate mankind. It would be nice to be huge, like him, to destroy their steel dwellings like grass underfoot. Sometimes he abandons his war on humanity to fight the greater evil, another monster, just as me and Atrox abandoned our fight to enact revenge.

Now that I think of it, if they didn't kill me, they didn't kill Atrox, which means I'll probably have to fight it again.

Shit...

Why do they hate me for what I did? They wanted a monster, so I became one. Monsters are big and angry and they roar and screech. Monsters kill and destroy. I did just that. It wasn't wrong when I killed other monsters, creatures that suffered just as much, if not more, as them. Isn't it all more thrilling when there's a sense of danger?

Still, there's an odd yearning to be like them. I've had it before.

Most likely scenario being the months of solitude are making me want for companionship. Maybe I want their freedom, their easy lives ran by mechanisms beyond my comprehension. Or maybe I just want to be included, a part of something greater rather than just being Obaddion and sitting in a cell.

My stomach is aching again. Out comes the blood, birthed with painful retching as a scarlet spray. The floor stinks more than before.

I just realized I can paint with this stuff.

Why was I so stupid not to realize that before?

Maybe it's because blood is life. Maybe it's wrong, unnatural. Maybe I'm just too tired and angry to think straight.

I draw trees, the tall pines of years passed in a place more dream than matter. Here are the great firs, there in the swampy valleys grow ancient oaks with mossy branches. I'm getting better, I can add details like the bumps on the trunks, dead leaves clinging to the branches here and there. I add the crows as dark forms in the sky, red not black.

Then there's my cave. No bear, I don't feel like jokes.

On another wall I draw more birds, herons and eagles and hawks. Little sparrows, all the kinds that would forage in the underbrush and chirp and sing and greet the dawn, even in the abyss of winter. I love birds, they're beautiful, and they never locked me in a cell and forced me to fight monsters. Herons are my favorite, they look so stately and elegant.

Now I remember that herons curve their necks back when in flight. That's how you tell them apart from storks. Ravens are like crows but much bigger. They sound deeper too, and have rough chin plumage and different tails. Eagles look fierce but have beautiful calls, high trilling and chirps odd for such powerful predators.

Memories flood in of walking amidst the trees and looking at birds. In my animal youth I never saw them as anything other than potential food. Only recently, in my time in the cell, have I grown to realize how

much of a gift they are. Bound neither to ground nor sea, they can take to the heavens at will.

That is one good thing of my blossoming mind.

I can now appreciate the birds.

They are all red on my walls, a part of me in memory and blood. So are the trees. Trees and birds. The sea is next, rocks and pools and crabs, delicious crabs, salty seaweed, summer banquet under the sun. These things are a part of me, I treasure them more than ever before.

I don't care to write more. They've seen the message. It shocked them, I could see the surprise on their faces, but it didn't get me more fish. They didn't even write back.

So what's the point? I'll draw instead, because I like that better, and I don't have to worry about structured things like spelling and grammar. I put blood on the walls and shape it, that's art. It doesn't have to be a particular kind of image to be a painting, it can be messy splotches and still count. That's why I love it, it's abstract.

Eventually the blood is a dry stain on the ground, sticky on my hands but with nothing to wipe it clean. I sit and watch absent mindedly as the flying turtle fixes a space ship to take the brainless child protagonists back home. In some ways the goofy old movies are better than the newer ones. They don't bother with trying to explain the fantastical or make everything fancy and beautiful. They're goofy and stupid and they owe up to it fully. But unlike the turtle I wouldn't help the children, I'd eat them. The taste is better than kibble.

If only I could talk, maybe they'd consider me their equal and treat me better. Or maybe it would merely make my "heinous crimes" even worse, for the closer I am to them the closer what I did is to murder. I hear the screams. They deserved it, didn't they? An eye for an eye?

Some were children. Children don't know. I hate them, but I can't necessarily blame them for how they act, just as I can't blame myself for

killing animals for food back in the forest. I didn't know they suffered, just as the children don't know I suffer.

I am a monster, and so are people. Flesh is just flesh after all. We're all complex carbon. But our minds, are they the same?

#

"I told you it's just a stupid animal... not even that... a flesh machine!"

"What kind of stupid animal writes on the wall?"

"One that's seen people do it. It watches at least three hours of TV a day"

"About that..."

"What?"

"We should probably stop playing certain... animated programs... for it. Our security cameras really don't need footage of a monster... well, you know"

"It's an ANIMAL. It'll hump things no matter what. It'll hump its own shit if it has to"

"True, true. But I just don't feel right about it. Like it or not, something in the procedure went wrong. We've been sent hundreds of Obaddon units over the years and none of them have done this. I think its old self is there... its thinking self. If people find out..."

"People WON'T find out. And besides, they're too lazy to care. Bread and circuses, burgers and monster arenas. As long as they themselves are content they won't care about some degenerate baboon-crocodile trying to regain sentience. Even if they know, they won't really stop it. They still have orcas at the marine parks, and they'll kill themselves out of boredom"

"There's still the issue of..."

"Not to mention it's mauled several dozen people to death.. It killed twenty-seven children and crippled five. It ATE children. If it turns out

you're right, well, then that means this thing is a murderer. Obaddion's better off being considered an animal, for us and itself".

#

There was a pond back in the woods I liked to visit. It was in one of the lower parts and surrounded by trees and thick brush. A little stream flowed into it, clear with a sandy bottom that bubbled and churned in places. It reminds me of this documentary I watched the other day where toxic gas bubbling in the bottom of a lake built up, broke free into the air, and killed all the animals living in the forests nearby. Giant birds and tiny horses, murderous ants and a walking whale. Something tells me they were here once, but gone. Ghosts.

Anyways, the pond was pretty large for a pond, almost to the point where you could call it a small lake. Either name works. A small river flowed in from the side opposite to the stream, bordered by thick grass that was lush and green in summer and dry and dead in winter. Ducks nested there, you could hear them rustling around. In the trees above there were herons, dozens perched in their great big stick-nests, a makeshift village silhouetted against the grey skies. Eagles too, gathering in the fall to eat the salmon coming in from the river. I came there in fall to eat the fish too, and ducks.

In colder times everything save the pines was dead and still, grey forests and spindly branches, dark waters clouded with mist and fog. Islands of old logs and reeds sprouted from the shallow regions, the dead grass nearby stretched to the sky in hopes of awaking a long-dormant sun. In summer it turned to a primordial swamp, lush with skunk cabbage, horsetails, and giant ferns. Muddy ground and thick brush kept me from venturing in too deep, not to mention the omnipresent flies. But it was lovely all the same.

Dreamt I was there, in autumn. Eagles sat in the trees overhead with the herons in an uneasy truce, ducks fluttered away at my footsteps. I was eating the dead salmon left by the birds, enjoying the soft, squishy meat.

When the carrion was gone I caught live ones, intercepting them in their journey upstream. I had gathered a pile and sat in the reeds by the shore, eating them and watching mist gather above the tranquil waters.

Birds of all kinds gathered at my feet, eating the scraps I tossed for them, and I was happy to see them up close and take in their beauty. Happy to eat fish and enjoy the calmness and early morning frost. There was the crunch of my feet on dead leaves, crisp air in my lungs. I was back, and I loved it, and in my dream I finished eating the fish and walked back into the forest and awoke to a prod jabbing my side.

It was another cleaning, and I sat there in silence as they scrubbed the floors and hit me with the prods. Never again would I be there. The dream mocked me, memories of the pond, a place I could never experience again, food I could never eat, things I could never see.

I am trapped.

Trapped in this hideous, painful body. Trapped in this confused mind, unknowing but knowing all the same. My flesh screams and my mind aches, neither know true reprieve, and I cannot give it to them.

When I see my reflection in the water dish I see a hideous monster with bulging eyes and tattered skin. My face looks like a testicle with teeth. I hate it. When I open my mouth the skin splits and bleeds, it hurts more to eat every time I do so. My feet are bruised, my hands have been rubbed raw. Standing is painful, my back can't take much anymore, and my huge sail is just a burden. What is it for?

They hate me. They made me a monster and I complied. I did what monsters do, are you not satisfied? Would you not do the same if our roles were reversed?

The people staring through the window give no response, because I cannot say these things, only think them. Thoughts are painful when they are but thoughts, unable to be put into words or writing. No one can hear me, and if they have they haven't answered. No one cares.

I can't see light anymore. It's a downward spiral at this point, floating into the abyss. Ever farther from the surface, the light. No one cares in the darkness, when you're with the anglerfish and giant squid. You drift to the bottom and things crawl up from the mud to eat you. We're all just meat.

Each day I sink a little further down. I can't see the bottom, nor the surface. I just keep sinking. There's demons down here, the dark things miles below the surface, things that remind me that even at being hideous I am inadequate. I used to take joy in food and sleep but they hurt so much. I lay and think about everything and hate myself and people and monsters and everything in between. The past is painful, I've begun to despise the things I loved.

Life is for the animals, for those who can eat and sleep and suffer and keep going under the sheer instinctual drive to survive and procreate. But I can't. I don't have a drive, a reason. There's no purpose for me here besides violence and suffering, I doubt there's a purpose for me anywhere else. I've sat and thought and I can't think of a reason to go on.

Each day I wake up and stare at the wall and eat and drink and piss in a dish and stare at the TV and sometimes I fight and die and am born all over again in a stinking pile of regurgitated blood to do the same thing. It's all so bland and meaningless, meat that moves and thinks and does things until it dies and no longer does things! What's the point? What am I supposed to do? Fight and die like monsters should, isn't that why I was made? Unless I'm not manmade. Is there someone out there who can hear me? Do I have a creator?

Please answer me.

I need help.

No one answers. I pray, but I don't know to whom. Something tells me there's something out there besides a mindless universe, a great big shit for a bunch of overcomplicated flies. But what, or who? Answer me if you are there. I can't bear this anymore. Sit and stare and wait. But for what? If I make it another year or so I'll be doing the same thing, death in

the arena would be merciful if it didn't hurt so much. They work you until you die. I killed that snake... thing. The snake was never retired, returned to its former home. The snake was never freed to see the light of the sun, breath fresh air.

Doesn't anyone think I can suffer? Are people so preoccupied with themselves that they can't see beyond their own meat-needs and listen to the screams? It's blissful but awful all the same, I know at least some of them know. If anything they can talk, they *should* be the higher beings.

Do you talk?

Thanks for reminding me that I can't. I can scream and bleed, that is pain. Words are not needed to express pain. Yet they sit there and cheer. I am alone in this suffering.

Just end it if you have nothing left for me. I can't take it anymore.

Without knowing that somebody cares about you and likes you, there isn't much point in doing anything. It sounds whiny, or self-centered at least, but I've found that in this solitude I'm constantly yearning for some kind of companionship. I just want someone who doesn't care that I can't talk, who doesn't care that I am hideous. Someone who doesn't use prods and doesn't screech and try to disembowel me. People are social creatures, maybe that's why they're so happy. They have all sorts of other people to talk to and be with and it's far better than staring at the wall or watching the TV remind you of what a menace you are in humanity's eyes, of what you want so badly but will never have. I don't talk because I can't. I want to, dearly. I want to let everything out, to tell someone.

That won't happen, no matter how hard I try. There's too much stress and agony, I'm just ready to be done. Tired of worrying, tired of pain. Tired of looking in the dish and seeing that nasty pumpkin grin, looking at the screen and seeing me, not my physical self but the embodiment of what I am in the nuke lizard and the big monkey: ravening brutes, mindless killers, antagonists to be killed and nothing more. Never once has the monster been the centerpiece, they name the shows after them and

put them on the title screen but the movie is about the people, because people talk and people think and I just kill and destroy and even if I don't that's what I'm expected to do. When I do it it's wrong, when I don't do it I'm treated as if I do.

Morals are subjective, messy, and hard to live up to. People bind me to theirs as if I was one of them, yet they treat me worse than most animals. Can I not suffer like you, worse than you? I don't want wealth, I just want to go back to the woods and sleep and listen to the rain. Sleep the long sleep, from which I never awake. I'm not afraid of it, even if I don't know what comes next. But whatever it is it can't be worse than what I'm going through right now.

Sometimes I wake up annoyed that I woke up at all.

Life is not meant for those who ponder it and become aware of the meaninglessness of it all. Once you realize that you're just meat and you do the same things until you die there's no point in suffering all the pain, all the worry, all the fear. Better to die and be food for the worms, creatures who live in bliss without need for names and laws and morals.

Every day it's harder to get up, harder to eat, harder to walk. I kick the floors and hit my head against the walls. People sit there on their nice chairs and do nothing and take all the benefits of modernity for themselves. Don't I work? I fight and bleed and nearly die to entertain you, don't I deserve at least something to take away the pain? More space than a cramped cell, more light than the sun-mockeries above?

You made me, I'm sure of it. You watch through the glass and mock me for my lack of speech, but I'm guessing you designed me that way. Why not give me something better? I don't want a palace, I don't want fine dining. Raw meat is fine. I just want to stop aching, for the scabs to go away and my skin to grow back. I don't want to cough up blood anymore, it's rare that a day goes by that my feces aren't red.

The gate is opening now, I see the dark of the passageway, and the dark is a brief bliss before those hideous pale lights flicker on. There's no

night and no day, everything's so unnatural. They didn't give me orange drink this time, no proper warning.

I hear the screams. It's Atrox.

Shit.

Out we go, into the great beyond. Down the path of cold stone and into the blinding light. Is light not good? Isn't light what gives life, energy to plants and color to the shadows? Why then am I growing to prefer the darkness and fear the light?

In the light I see myself for who I am and the world around me. I can't help but hate it, gag at my reflection and the faces of people, rage at the way things are but I can't change anything about it. The darkness was ignorance and animal bliss, the only thing keeping me from this pain I feel now. I want it so bad, but it's wrong. So many suffered at my hands, I hear the screams. I don't know if it was right to kill those people now, by all accounts it should be, an eye for an eye, but something feels *wrong*. Like I'm hurting myself when I hurt them. Their screams are different, they hurt me more than animal screams. But their abuse hurts more than Glutton teeth and Atrox claws, it feels like betrayal. I am close to them somehow, but so far. It's painful.

There's cheering. No, no, I can't bear to hear it and hear their laughter and see nothing in their eyes but joy of the spectacle. Don't they care? Don't they hear the screams?

I killed them. I deserved it. I am a monster.

They took me from my home, imprisoned me, tortured me. They deserved it.

Which is right? I am angry at them and myself but who is the greater wrong? Was it so bad to punish them for their ignorance, or perhaps uncaring? Should I have sat and taken it like some mindless dog that will come back to beg for a treat two seconds after you swat it?

The gate closes behind, and I see Atrox, writhing and screaming with scars on its hide.

That is a monster. That is how they see me, and there is nothing I can do about it.

Atrox screams and charges, claws rip my flesh and I fight back, but it's too fast. Everything is a blur, I try to do something but before I can Atrox has already countered it.

I'm fat and slow. Too fat, too slow. My bones can barely support me now, my muscles are wasting away. I try and get up, it throws me back down and gives a sinister chuckle. Blood drizzles from my pores, my head is pinned to the ground by a clawed hand.

Fat and slow. Consumed with rage but unable to act upon it. No one cares, they cheer as Atrox rips my skin raw and thrashes me like a chew toy. Fat, wrinkly garbage.

Fuck this gameshow music. I hate them, their joy and companionship and all the things they have that I don't. I hate being nothing more than a plaything, smashed against the floor like a plastic toy. Worthless.

Creator help me, if you are anything but man. Please don't let this be all there is.

Again my head hits the ground, Atrox is busy trying to rip off my tail with its teeth. I bite its leg and hold on, crushing through the muscle and bone. Atrox screams.

Just let me sleep. I'm so tired...

Atrox rips at my chest, bashing my head against the ground as bones crack in my teeth. There is no satisfaction. My opponent just another toy. People cheer and I hear its name. They want Atrox to win, Atrox to kill me and rip my flesh and tear everything up because there's nothing in here worth preserving, nothing but clumsy, fat, useless meat.

Chapter Nine

Ascension

Eventually I'm back in the cell. A few days pass. I can't stand eating, the food lies there rejected. I drink a bit, just a bit, and it hurts to swallow. Pus leaks from my scabs and glues me to the floor, when I force myself to move I must rip free, painfully. But I don't want to move. I don't want to eat. Let my body eat itself alive, let the flies begin their feast. It's all rotting anyway.

I don't want to eat... stare at the TV... anything. I feel ashamed to do anything but lay down... that's all I can do... right. Whatever confidence I had been sheltering after all those beatings is gone. I don't feel strong anymore... I did once... and I don't feel worthy of living. Natural selection insists that the useless... the weak... myself... die off. I suppose it's pathetic to mentally collapse after losing a single fight, but it hasn't really been a single fight... more like dozens. Besides, you try getting beat up for two hours straight and telling yourself it's alright. I never wanted to do any of this.

When my soul exits this body and my consciousness becomes extinct, I will leave without satisfaction. There are no good memories that aren't overshadowed by their hideous cousins from the past, no great feats or noteworthy milestones. Months spent trailing cracks in the concrete... scraping the walls... watching flies drink piss off the floor.

So much never experienced.

The feeling of strength... independence that comes with starting your own life and making your way in the world. The excitement of growing close to another... finding one who cares... loves you. The boost in self-esteem with small victories... the earnings of hard work. The pride of achieving... education... careers... forming a little world of your own. The almost overwhelming fun with your friends at the beach... the

concert... even roughhousing in the backyard. The day you and another start a family... create others in your image... carry on your lineage and see your children grow into something you can take pride in.

My story holds none of these. It'll serve as a comedy to some... the things I've done... my failures... dirty things... weaknesses. A lesson to others... there's many in my months... years of blood and pain. Perhaps even a tragedy for the sympathetic ones... but no one seems to feel anything for the monster but hatred or indifference.

Either way, my story will fade into nothingness.

My story was not meant to be.

I was made wanting... human things... but I'm property, lower in their eyes than an animal... nothing... deserving of nothing. They'll use me up and then I'll become nothing... without ever achieving anything but blood on my teeth... scars on my ugly skin.

No one wants me... not for anything but violence... a dirty pleasure... like certain shows for me. Humans say it's bad but they indulge in it nonetheless, veiling it under cinema... morals... messages... the necessity of conflict. They deny their own awful nature but yet they anthropomorphize human morals onto me... neither man nor beast... WHAT AM I!?

I'm not a machine but they take me apart like one... filling me with metal things... metal and bone... metal and flesh... an iron giant in beast's clothing. Not an animal but they treat me like one... not a person but I think like one. Monster is a relative term, and unlike human fantasies my monsters win, ravaging my innocence without opposition.

Angels... I see them as the light of the rising Sun on a chilly morning... the iridescence of rippling waves... the breeze in the trees. Beauty... but I can't even run back to the wilderness I knew and hide... seclude myself from a world I hate. I want the angels to take me but I know they'd hate me like the rest... God would hate me... a monster...

after what I've done. I doubt God even cared for me in the first place... I'm not his creation.

Why give me this? Sentience, it's called. I know I am Obaddion and Obaddion is me, and with identity comes the knowledge that I am a monster. I tried and failed, they see me as a menace.

Where are you, my Creator? Didn't you care when you made me, didn't you have a plan?

Or I am just a plaything of yours, made to fight and die because that's what monsters do and no matter what I think and feel I can't talk and I can't be a person so I'm nothing but an instrument of predesigned violence?

No one will help. No one cares.

Blood leaks from my mouth, Atrox fancied striking my throat. Every inch of me is dry and cracked and aches, skin is gone and replaced with scabs, leaking pus and sheltering maggots.

Is there a worth to this artwork? Beauty in its shape, lovely colors on the rancid skin?

Do I matter at all, to anyone?

No, no, no. Fat and slow and ugly, there isn't beauty in this painting. The screams condemn me, I hate myself nearly as much as I hate people. What is there to love? To care for? I don't have friends or family, no others to share my being with. I don't have any real purpose, there's no will to keep going because all I do is fight and die and rise again to do the same thing. I am worthless.

It's only a matter of time. They'll work me until I die because it doesn't matter that I scream because I can't talk. I'm not them, my existence doesn't matter. I'm only even here because they were trifled to put me so, what else is there to my life besides the arena?

I died long ago, when I realized what monsters really are. And I've been dead since, doing things just because, suffering because I can't see a

way out. There was never much hope, only a refusal to acknowledge the truth. I see it now.

This existence is unbearable. Fear is awfully powerful... it's kept me from doing this for so long. An old memory told me that this wasn't the way out but... fuck it... I'm tired of this.

There has always been something wrong with you.

No place in this world for monsters, especially ones like me... useless ones... slow ones... too slow and weak to fight... no one wants to be around something so deformed. The one thing I was meant to do... *fight and die*... I'm terrible at it.

You serve no purpose.

Actually I do. I'm everyone's little pet... Obaddion! From the television series, dancing and shaking hands with Plane-fucking Panther in a crossover episode... they play them on the TV sometimes... I'm just a joke... a children's show villain... it's all a fucking nightmare.

Mother and Father... Mom and Dad...

Your birth made them incomplete.

I don't know if I ever had them... sometimes I feel I did... sometimes I feel I was disappointing... so I ran away, just like I'm about to do now. Dreams of falling. Why are the memories of that bridge so poignant in my head? Sometimes I feel it's all just this broken, confused mess of a brain... after all I'm just an ugly mess of different parts smashed together like multicolored playdough... not natural... never born just made... what am I!?

Love is an illusion... so heavily driven by appearance. No one cares about me, no one ever did. I won't be missed... just a number... another mouth to feed in a tiny, dark cell...

Life and death. I never asked for either. This isn't life, so where's death?

It won't stop... the voices... my own... hating.

I've been hurting myself just as much as others have... I can't stop.

Meat is meat, it confines me, rots away. My shell is fading. But my soul is still here. It yearns to be free, free of this awful form and this awful place. I just want to escape. I just want to see my old home one last time, know it's still there, know that everything isn't just fake suns and molded stone.

Just let me be done.

I get up, yellow pus coating my scabs, blood drying on the floor. My legs shake under their burden, it won't be long before I can't walk at all. Useless. On all sides are the walls, walls because monsters don't deserve freedom. But I don't care for my body anymore, it's just a big shit for the flies. I want to ascend beyond meat, free my soul from its confines. Where will I go? Perhaps nowhere. Maybe blissful nothing, where I never have to think of what I have done or what they have done or see my hideous face. The light has brought nothing but pain. My heart yearns for the enveloping dark.

Whack. I hit my head on the wall. Not accidentally, slipping on the blood. It hurts.

I get up and do it again, this time on purpose. Again and again and again, beating my head on the wall, beating out this awful, painful mind and all its painful thoughts.

Each time the bones crack a little more, my soul seeping through in a river of blood, out from the meat that has restrained it so long. I don't belong here, I don't belong anywhere. There's nothing left for me.

My crest is shattered, blood is spraying on the concrete. No one is watching, I am alone. It hurts but not as much as I've been hurting for so long. I'm so tired. I just want to be free.

Again and again, like hammer on nail. My neck is strong, the impact of skull on rock is forceful, but my head is thick, hard to break. I smash myself into it harder. I can't bear to be here anymore, alone in the cell, alone in my suffering. The pain is awful but living is even worse.

I can't think straight anymore. My mind is foggy, my eyes can't see well, but there's the wall. I strike myself against it in a final blow, there's a loud crack and then nothing more.

Chapter Ten

One of Many

Free...

Free.

Free!

Obaddion felt as if he were floating, suddenly beyond the cell and the city and the skies and into the brilliant heavens, up and up towards the stars but feeling as if he were going down at the same time. There was light and darkness and celestial bodies beyond his comprehension and it felt right but wrong and he drifted along for a while before stopping, hovering motionlessly before a vast multicolored cloud of heavenly matter, fumes spreading and shifting in the image of a rose.

He floated there, unable to turn away from the rose as it turned and shifted and revolved like an organ unto itself, terrified of it but unable to decide why. Something moved in the center, the petals splitting apart and fading as a battered skull pushed free and slithered atop a muscular, sinewy neck. Now the petals were morphing into the flesh of the vast body that came into view, immense wings that started off meat and slowly transcended into brilliant light that twisted and flickered like flame.

It contemplated him. He could feel it searching, a rumbling, churning sensation throughout his entire body, and though he felt nothing else this was all too vivid, as if in life. The skull, which reminded him of the hideous cyclops skulls of certain river dolphins (now where did he see those?) hovered motionlessly, neck curving like a stork's and flowing into the immense body, wings like the very heavens themselves.

"I don't know what to say".

Obaddion had spoken and immediately regretted it. He should have been elated to finally achieve speech, but something told him this was a place where physical limitations did not matter, where he was no longer

meat. His thoughts merely came out, words spoken but not by mouth. Then again, the silence was too unnerving to be kept.

“I don’t blame you”, trilled a voice, beautiful but terrifying all the same. It came not from the skull but in the air all around him, in his mind and the dream. He attributed it to the creature nonetheless.

“Well...”. Obaddion stuttered off uncomfortably.

“Well what?”, trilled the voice. “Do you wish to know why you are here, or what happened? Or do you want to know who I am and what I want?”.

“All of them, I suppose”, said Obaddion, quietly.

“You are here because your body is dying, and your soul can see the beginnings of what is beyond”, began the voice, sounding grandiose in its explanations. The being hovered there quietly, gently treading air with its immense wings. “Actually, no, not dying, *dead*. You killed yourself. Not that I blame you, I would probably do the same. People are awful. Don’t you agree?”.

“The ones I’ve seen”, wheezed Obaddion, thinking back to the prods, the cheering.

“They *all* are”, trilled the voice with obvious disgust. “Human nature is inherently evil and self-serving, they can’t help but despise you, treat you as a disposable”.

“What are you?”, asked Obaddion, softly, then regretting it because he figured he should be more polite. He had never really had much of a chance or reason to use manners, but here at the mercy of whatever entity it was, he figured he should.

“I am Leben”, said the voice, pausing for effect. “I exist not as a physical entity but in your thoughts, but I can manipulate physical matter under certain circumstances. Like you, I am seen as a monster”.

Like you.

Someone who could hear him. Someone who knew what he said and understood him. He couldn't talk to people. He couldn't talk to Atrox or the Gluttons. But he could talk to Leben.

It was probably an imaginary friend spurred by near-death hallucinations, but still.

Leben understands me, Mom! It writes poetry!

Obaddion chuckled at the thought. He did sound like some kind of whiny teen when he thought about it. Of course, he had never been a teenager, just a monster, always a monster. He didn't even remember being a baby monster now that he thought of it, just the way he was now, but maybe a little less troubled, a little less sore.

"Don't berate yourself", rang Leben's voice. "Everyone needs companionship, someone to talk to. You've been denied that for so long".

"I just want to be back in the woods I came from", said Obaddion, thinking forlornly of the one place where he had been happy. But he had been different then, it seemed so long ago.

Would it be the same?

"You can't have that...", began Leben. "With people running around. You're a monster, they hate and fear you. Do you not think that if you were there and they were still in power, that they would not come and recapture you?".

"I know", hissed Obaddion. "But that doesn't mean I don't long for it all the same".

"Perhaps we can make it happen...", said Leben, hovering slowly, angelically almost.

"I'm guessing you have a plan".

"Remember the second time you fought Atrox?".

"How do you know about that?".

"I just do. I've been in your mind since you had one". Leben's neck curled and uncurled like a giant snake, bits of smooth, iridescent skin flaking off to reveal tubes of muscle and bioluminescent veins. It was both

beautiful and hideous, as if some mind completely foreign to human thought had heard of their ideas of beauty and majesty and tried to replicate it, only half-successfully.

“How come I haven’t heard you before?”.

“Believe me, you have”.

Obaddion stopped and began to wonder when he had last conversed with a metaphysical space-butterfly-dragon-stork-river-dolphin-skull-thing.

“Anyways, you were free that day, free for just a bit, and they paid in blood. My plan is that, tenfold. All you have to do is let me guide you”.
Leben grinned from its toothy skull, bits of bone flaking off from the crest and drifting away into the heavens.



“You’ll show me how to get out?”, asked Obaddion.

“I will make you strong. Strong! (here Leben flared out its immense wings, blazing with translucent light, and let out a bone-chilling scream) Beyond what they intended for you, enough to topple their hideous buildings and lay low their faith in the world they have made for themselves! Creation beyond creator!”.

“Do I have to get nuked in order to do this?”, chuckled Obaddion. “Or climb up a building and fight planes?”.

“Just give yourself to me”, trilled Leben. “I will guide you, just so long as you pledge your service to me and do as I say. Then you will be free to make them suffer as you have for so long”.

Obaddion hesitated, beholding the vast entity before him with wide eyes. He was beginning to wonder whether or not he should trust Leben. After all, there was a hint, just a subtle hint, of world-ending cosmic abomination in its mannerisms.

At the same time, Leben was the only one who could communicate with him, Leben was the only one who had really cared to help him, Leben was the only one who had showed any interest in him beyond his designation as an arena monster that fought and died. It was exciting in a way, to know that something so strange and powerful had taken interest in him. He had looked up (as well as he could in his cell), and always hoped that something was looking back, always hoping that his thoughts didn't go unnoticed. Now he knew.

“Don't worry”, chuckled Leben, the skull tilting back and almost grinning. “Mankind is my enemy too. But I don't have any means to fight them, not without a physical ally. I can give you all the things you desire, even the ones you can't put to words yourself, if you so choose. Do we have a deal?”.

“I suppose”, wheezed Obaddion, watching the wings trail off until they became the heavens themselves, flowing, swirling feathers into light.

“Excellent!”, clicked Leben. It began to drift away, slowly fading.

“Wait!”, began Obaddion. “How was I... well, made? What am I?”.

“Patience”, whispered Leben, the skull floating disturbingly close to him. Obaddion wanted to flinch, to shy away, but resisted. Even he knew basic manners. “You shall see, soon enough, and I pity you for it. There are some things best left unknown”.

With that, it was gone.

#

There was a steady mechanical drumming and creaking, gears shifting and wheels turning. Obaddion lay still, exhausted and aching beyond words, but he felt as if he were moving all the same. Steam puffed and hit his face, hot steam, and he awoke with a jolt. His eye opened wide, the tiny black pupil flitting back and forth, taking everything in.

Alive.

He was in a massive room, like a warehouse. It was dark and smelled like meat, and he was on a conveyor belt.

All at once a series of unpleasant scenarios flooded his mind, machines to chop and grind, dark pits in which to die all over again. He lay with his mouth open, gasping for air. There was the urge to get up, to move, to look around, but he was tired. So very tired.

Just let me rest.

He didn't really care, what would happen to him now couldn't be any worse than before. All he wanted was a nice, long sleep. Saliva and blood drizzled from his mouth as he began to drift off.

“Get up”, commanded a voice in his head, and he awoke again with a startled jolt.

Leben.

The dream flooded back now, the memories. Again Obaddion remembered what had happened and what he needed to do. He scanned the room a second time.

The lovely machine transporting him through the warehouse was a bloody conveyor belt about the size of a small road, segmented and black,

massive wheels rumbling underneath. It stunk with decay and was sticky with sweat and pus.

Turning his head despite the protests of his aching neck, he looked to see the mutilated corpse of the Glutton laying in front of him. It was on the belt too. But unlike him, it was dead. No living thing could smell that terrible.

Obaddion slowly forced himself to lift his head up and get a good look at what was happening. At once he was hit with the nasty impression of a meat factory, hooks and chains holding up skinned carcasses, parts laying bundled on the tables or bagged in freezers, tubes and pipes all along the walls. The conveyor belt was covered in the mangled bodies of dead monsters, arena victims.

He gave a little wheeze and collapsed.

#

“Get up and eat”, commanded the voice, waking him up again.

It hurts...

“The grinder they’re sending you to will hurt even worse”. The voice was harsh and unsympathetic, but undoubtedly Leben’s. “There’s no place here for comfort. You must feed and grow”.

Obaddion looked to see the conveyor belt dipping down several meters ahead, dumping the bodies into a vast, dark pit that screamed and churned with all sorts of blades and wheels and other tools designed to chop up the waste. Garbage disposal.

In an instant he had scrambled off and sat, exhausted, on the concrete floor.

Garbage.

Trash.

He was nothing more, nothing less. No grave, no funeral. No one would care to do that, because he was just ugly meat to fight and die and then be tossed away. Nothing mattered. Looking off into the distance, he could see other machines processing and shaping the kibble blocks they

fed him. It dawned upon him that they were near undoubtedly made from the ground-up remains of other monsters. He had been eating his fallen opponents.

“Not that it matters, really”, began the voice. “You’ve eaten other monsters before, and you can do it again. Taste is mere pleasure, meat is meat and you need it to grow strong. Now, eat!”.

Obaddion listened, reluctantly, and shuffled back to the belt, dragging off the disemboweled corpse of a giant, iridescent-black snake with tiny little legs, like the one he fought months ago, Great Ophio or something. Actually, it looked pretty much identical.

More pertinent was that it tasted like slimy rubber, wracking his throat with pain as chunks of meat slid down and plopped in his stomach. The hide was tough, the flesh sinewy and slick with blood and other fluids. He forced himself to eat it all the same, stuffing down nearly a third of the massive corpse.

“Good”, said the voice, loud over the incessant pounding and creaking of machinery. Obaddion was pretty sure only he could hear it. An imaginary friend. Better than nothing, he supposed, or perhaps making up companionship was even sadder than lacking it.

“There’s a little tranquilizer imbedded in the flesh at the base of your neck. It’ll knock you out once they realize you’re loose. Rip it out”.

That sounds painful. I don’t...

“Just do it!”.

He did, and it hurt. He screamed, but the device which had impeded his last rush to freedom now lay bloody on the floor, a tattered ornament thrown aside. His neck screamed in pain, unknowing of how necessary the act had been.

“Now, grow!”.

And grow he did.

Eat and grow and eat and grow.

His thoughts were set aside as his body began to ache, his stomach rumbling with sudden, incessant hunger. His flesh churned and bulged, his bones groaned as they replaced what they lost. An animal hunger was overtaking him, spurred by sudden, painful growth, and he was condemned to sate it as best he could.

In several minutes the entirety of the snake-monster was gone. He ate and defecated and ate some more, the flies rejoicing as blood drizzled down his chin, claws searching eagerly for another corpse to feed. Gone were his limitations, food was food, and he was starving.

Leben must have been doing something, spurring his cells into sudden action, catalyzing a renewal like never before. He was pained, body screaming in demand for more flesh, fallen opponents stuffed down an unsatisfied maw. Now, they were delicious.

He stopped after a few hours, taller and heavier, looming over the conveyor belt. Yes, he was growing. All that food, all those former enemies. Hadn't a couple of them looked familiar?

Yes. There was the snake, the skulled gorilla thing, and... Atrox? He had eaten two near-identical Atrox clones, for clones they must have been, or perhaps in his unfamiliarity of the creatures his eyes could not notice any differences. Still, there were multiples of every monster. Which had to mean...

Oh no.

There they were, rumbling along on the belt towards the grinder, armored bodies lifeless, tails drooped sadly like garden hoses. Some had been decapitated, others had their jaws broken. One had its intestines spilling out, still hot and steaming.

Other Obaddions.

He gave a pained, terrified gasp as he watched the lifeless bodies fall down into the grinder to delighted metallic screaming, blood and skin spraying everywhere as they were chopped up, like scraps to the waste disposal machine in sinks.

Just trash, just meat, nothing more than waste to be disposed.

He was garbage. They were garbage. They used them and then tossed them away when they could be used no more. No one cared. People just wanted their monster fights, and now the sad casualties of those bloodbaths lay jumbled like plastic toys, cheap action figures stuffed in a toy chest, then the trash when the child outgrew them.

One by one they fell, and Obaddion collapsed under the weight of it all, mortified as he watched tattered copies of himself fall into nothing. Never would he know them, the creatures most alike to himself. They were nothing but trash to be thrown away.

Again came the growing pains, and his infernal hunger awoke once more.

“They are but meat now. Eat them”.

Obaddion hurt so much, the hunger was too great. He could not help but obey, and he hated himself for it. The mind was willing but the needs of the flesh overruled. Snatching up a mangled corpse, he began to gnaw on the tail, eating his brethren, eating himself.

Had he anything?

He didn't even have the happy knowledge that at least he was unique, that he was Obaddion and not just another Joe Slouch. But he was a clone, looking (and probably thinking) the same as all the other Obaddions, thrown away like trash because they were disposable, he was disposable, and when one died they could just make another and send it out to fight.

Tasting them was tasting himself, and even in his ravenous state it was disgusting, like rotten meat made alive, but he needed it. Ever larger he grew, body screaming for more, consuming the others until all were one, one great big Obaddion that had to bend over so he didn't hit the roof of the warehouse with his sail. His legs buckled under the immense new weight.

What now?

“Start walking. Look for more food. You'll escape soon”.

When?

“Patience. I will be here to guide you”.

Eat and grow, eat and grow. He devoured everything: kibble and corpses and ground-up monster meat and even some pizza that the humans had left out on a table. Oh, it was delicious! Why had he been denied such pleasures? While his creators dined on divine cuisine, he gnawed on the processed remains of his opponents. Cannibalism.

Everything shook and trembled when he walked, including him. His legs were begging for rest, his massive new body and the rapid growth that spawned it were taking their toll. He wanted to rest. But he couldn't. Something told him if he lay down now, he wouldn't be able to get up.

On and on, down in the dark, ploughing through Hell. The demons rumbled and churned, chopping up former foes and making them into food. Never before had he yearned for the woods as much as he did now, the clear streams and rivers, the morning mist, the rain against the pines.

Why couldn't he just be a bird and fly away? Have lovely feathers instead of scar tissue and maggots, a walking feast for the flies. Spread his wings and glide off, back to the trees, back to the sounds of running water and chirping sparrows, without cages and electric prods.

Why couldn't he just live in peace without this horrible mind and this horrible body?

It was a monstrosity unto itself, ever-growing, demanding more, more, more!

Eat and grow, eat and grow!

Fallen brothers, supple meat to sate my maw.

Bodies torn by tooth and claw.

Teeth to bite and tusks to maim, you are but meat to which I lay claim.

Come man, if you love your creation so.

Set him free into the daylight glow.

Lest he do it himself...

Eat and grow, eat and grow!

They were small now, devoured after but a few greedy bites. Blood drizzled down his chin, exciting the flies. Meat clung between his teeth, desperate to avoid the wailing, churning stomach. A slurry of liquid feces lay in his path, intestines whimpered under the constant work.

Alarms sounded, people screamed, but he ignored them in his all-consuming rampage.

He stopped.

The meat-shop and its abominations had come to an end.

Now there was a wall. He had always feared walls, walls that trapped, walls that kept him alone, walls that obscured the world beyond. Obaddion stood, hunched over under his vast new weight. He eyed the metal mass worriedly, panicking, fearful of being trapped and contained in that awful place with its awful smells and abominations against all he held dear.

Then he thought, seeing pale light coming through the stained windows. It was time to overcome the fears and limits that had held him for so long. Man made him, undoubtedly so, and man had abused their creation. He would have to take it upon himself to punish them.

In minutes, the wall was a mangled pile of rubble, and Obaddion stepped out into the daylight. Free at last!

“Not yet”. The voice contained the slightest hint of mockery, and he reminded himself there was still much to be done.

His eyes scanned the grey light of day. He was out on one of those concrete flats, the parking lots if he remembered correctly. Big grey buildings, small to him now, lay scattered here and there, a veritable maze. He quickly noted the lines of cells off to his left. Stained with his blood, reeking of his stench. His cell was a part of him, having shaped him into what he was now, told him about his place in the world. He shouldn't be free, he should be contained, imprisoned, alone. The stench of death lay

over it. He had died and been reborn, there was the scent of a past life. He crushed it without pity.

His body was different, his jaws elongated, his legs thicker. Now his tail was much longer and heavier, a flexible whip of keeled scales and padded tissue that trailed behind him like a monarch's feathered robe. Twirling it in great arcs, he slapped the skies and then swung it over the cells, shattering the concrete that had once been so indomitable to him.

Screams, then frantic movement as the surviving monsters scrambled to freedom, crawling from the rubble and attacking the workers. Atrox (or more accurately *an* Atrox) was the first, leaping blindly at the shockers, screaming when hit. It tossed a car, flattening several guards.

Obaddion turned and noticed a dark shape limping out of the rubble.
An Obaddion.

It wasn't his name, it was a name for all his kind, all the plastic toy monsters to be thrown away when they got wrecked. Just as every tree was just a tree, every crow was just a crow, he was just another Obaddion. He wasn't an individual, he wasn't worthy of preservation. Disposable blood sport fodder, nothing more.

#

Damn you, creator!

Did you not think of your creation as anything more than a toy!? Am I just a trifling of your entertainment needs, fight and die and nothing more? Why did you give me this, this horrible, awful mind and this horrible, awful body!? It was you, who else? Who would make something like me, to suffer so!?

I was happiest as an innocent animal in the woods, ignorant. It was blissful, the intellectual darkness. Now look! Don't you hear the screams!? Didn't you see me bleed and die and vomit myself out every day? Didn't you care that your creation suffered? I wouldn't be doing this, not if you treated me right, not if you let me heal, let me rest, gave me more than a tiny cell that I could barely turn around in!

But you didn't.

I am a monster.

I can't talk.

I look hideous.

That is all that matters to you. What matters to me is useless.

Wasn't my sentence obvious? I tried to prove I was like you, that I knew words and art and suffering. But you saw, and ignored, because a monster's feelings, its suffering, they don't matter. All that matters is that I fight and die and act like your overgrown nuke dinosaurs on the television.

Them big ole' monsters on the tele! Oy, look at dem teethers! Them fangs!

Did your audience know what I was really like? Did they care?

Of course not! People care about people. I am not a person. People can be nice to smart animals, cute animals. Dolphins and chimps, dogs and elephants. They're cute and lovable and they aren't a living breeding ground for flies. Appearance is everything.

But I am not cute. I am not lovable. No one cares. People aren't nice to the monster.

Boo hoo.

Look at my brother, so small to me now. He's hurt, he's limping, but still, limping to freedom. Hopeful freedom.

You won't get far, little Obaddion. There's so much ahead, so much grey and stone and steel and glass. This isn't your world, you weren't made for it. The one place you could be happy is so far away.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever seen the trees? Listened to the rain on a murky afternoon? Do you know of such beauty? Does it trouble you like it does to me?

I won't know, we can't talk.

But I do know that this life isn't worth living.

I have been chosen as divine punishment, to end man and their aberrant ways. Let the earth return to how it should be, pure wilderness, the simple laws of nature, without electric prods and bloody arenas. I will do this alone and no more.

We monsters don't belong. We weren't made for nature. We don't deserve it, just as people don't deserve us. We're abominations, and when we're gone it'll be good.

I'm sorry, fellow Obaddion. All this fight will bring you is pain. You just want to rest, don't you? You can barely walk, the trees are so far...

#

Obaddion stomped on his tiny clone, crushing him in an instant. The spine hurt his feet, blood soaked into his soles. There was a sickly crunch.

No...

Was it right to do that? Was it right to deny him life?

But was denying life so regrettable after all? It was so hard, so painful. Obaddions aren't natural. They don't belong anywhere. If the others had minds like his they knew, they knew that they were just meat, meat to fight and die for a boisterous crowd of sophisticated apes.

They were just too stubborn to give in, to quit.

He had, finally broken after so long, so much pain...

The killing made him quiver and ache, it hurt so much. To slaughter the very creature alike to him, one who shared all the pain he did. But he had to. This life wasn't for them. There was nothing but cells and grey skies and prods, they had been made to be monsters and nothing more. Death was blissful.

Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, out and into radiant flight...

Like the emergence of day, birthed from abyssal night...

Amber sky greets the morning fog.

Odd things creep from under a rotten log.

Gone is night, here is day.

Man has God, but to whom do I pray?

*There is nothing left but pain in life.
To sleep forever is victory over all the strife.
Humanity will pay for my blood in kind.
Then my bones shall break and no longer mend..
And I...
I will ascend.*

Chapter Eleven

The Compliant Monster

What did they expect? They made a monster. Monsters kill and destroy.

Aren't they satisfied?

Of course not. People are stupid, they expect everything to go their way, to work like they want it to. The negatives don't matter as long as they don't affect them, as long as they're only exposed to the positives. And when they do care to point out the negatives, it's all in some flimsy attempt to give themselves a just cause and feel of heroism, making the world a better place. But the truth is, the world has always been in a long, ugly loop.

Ages ago, the ancient fish and giant salamander amphibians killed and ate each other and suffered under the sun with no better goals or purposes than to survive and procreate. Strange reptiles followed, early synapsids and agile dinosaurs. All fought and died, existing only to, well, exist. Then mammals came into prominence and suffered just the same, eat and grow and fight and breed and die. But for what?

Existence alone can't justify survival for anything more than instinct machines, worms and frogs and other lowly creatures. But were they truly lowly, for they could appreciate life for what it was, by not being capable of appreciating it at all? Stupidity is bliss, unless one is stupid but smart enough to know that they are at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

Anyways, life had always been in one big, long loop. Animals busied themselves with survival, survival to procreate, just as all their precedents, and the smarter ones worried themselves with things that didn't matter in a vain attempt to convince themselves that they were of higher standing, that they were special. They weren't. If anything they were more evil than the rest.

People killed and stole and fought and hated since they lived in caves and painted on the walls. They kept doing it in the centuries since, when they built houses and made money and formed governments. They do it now too, because human nature has always been the same, the facts of life have always stuck as truths and constants.

Utopia is a foolish aspiration, nothing can be perfect. To make a perfect society, humans would have to mess with their own brains, alter their nature so as to remove those parts of them that spur hatred, conflict, unnecessary stimulation, and then they would no longer be human because by perfecting themselves they would be removing parts of their humanity: their character, their aspirations, their flaws.

Things should be imperfect but perfect all the same, like nature. Nature works beautifully. For all their advances in technology people can never equal the beauty of the rising Sun, capture the taste of fresh fish. These things I hold close and treasure, they are all that is here to tell me that life can be good.

#

It was snowing, a steady, thick snow that draped the rooftops in ivory gowns and cloaked the ground with iridescent brilliance. On him, however, the snow merely melted off, and he realized how hot he was. Uncomfortably hot, with steam rising from his massive new frame, the flesh still raw and soft.

“Don’t worry”, trilled Leben’s voice in a reassuring tone. “This is merely a byproduct of your rapid growth and huge size. You produce and retain heat very well now, most of it from all the things I had to do to help you grow so large so fast. Unnaturally rapid cell multiplication has its side effects, unfortunately”.

Obaddion groaned as his raw hide ached and churned, bubbling as parts began to harden while others still were soft and half-formed. Flesh bulged, rippling with the vast influx of energy, meat made unto meat anew. His sail stretched upwards, creaking like windblown trees. He could

feel it, his vertebrae groaning as they enlarged and grew ever taller, his aching back buckling under the immense new weight it was doomed to bear.

Steam continued to trail from his body, disappearing into the pale skies. No, not all pale, there was light, golden light, just barely there atop the buildings, gracing the snow, peaking through the clouds...

The Sun...

The Sun!

It was there, beyond all the grey and smoke and steam, beyond the darkness that had consumed him for months, eating away at his past life under the trees, telling him that there was nothing more than grey skies and a cramped cell. Like an angel, lofty in its heavenly brilliance. It reminded him of Leben, and he wondered if that voice had ever become flesh and seen angels, seen the Sun.

Then the sun sunk below the clouds, below the grey, and the world descended back into darkness. Obaddion groaned and lowered his head, unable to greet the dim skies.

“There is much work to be done”, said the voice. “Go, move. The shock over your current growth won’t last for long. Soon they’ll plan to capture you. But they’ll quickly realize that’s impossible, and then they will resort to trying to kill you”.

They won’t be able to, right?

“Flesh fares poorly against steel. Do as much damage as you can now”.

As if on cue, something inside him gurgled, a deep, ugly feeling that resonated within him and crawled up into his sail, spilling out into the chill air. Billowing, churning, burning his skin and causing him to groan and convulse as it puffed from his vents, humid smoke from a biological volcano. It was steam, hot, blindingly painful steam issuing forth from the oozing vents along the base of his sail, spilling out into the air until it clouded the buildings around him and spread into the skies.

“Fire breath and city-smashing!”, groaned Leben. “What dull clichés. Why not just make everyone sick instead?”. The voice faded off into a bold, resonating laugh, the heavens cavorting within Obaddion’s fragile mind.

There’s something in the steam, isn’t there... Ow! Damn it!

Obaddion roared and struck a nearby building with his hand, enraged by the burning, stinging feeling that consumed him, spilling out into the skies. His tail swished this way and that, shattering glass and denting steel.

“Yes. A friendly little bacterium I grew inside you”, chuckled Leben. “Airborne, and among the tiniest of particles, it’s all too easy for people to inhale. People are the preferred host, their brains are nice and fat. The bacterium love those, they are designed to target organisms with large, complex brains, a perfect meal. Don’t worry, your body produces guard cells that keep your brain safe. I suppose they’d go for chimps and dolphins in a pinch, but who cares for those?”.

It hurts!

Damn!

Obaddion keeled over as the steam flowed from his back, burning, boiling steam. How did the bacteria survive the heat? That awful, stinging heat, bubbling his young flesh and stinging his wounds. At least it would kill some of the flies...

The things you make are pain! It burns! Burns!

“Alright, I’ll give you a break”, trilled Leben. “Your skin is still young after all. It needs to harden. But remember, the steam is your weapon. It won’t flatten buildings, but make enough and you’ll kill more people than you ever could with your teeth and claws”.

How do I control it?

“I’ll leave it to you to figure it out. Go for a nice stroll, enjoy the snow. You’ve been in that cell for so long now...”.

#

Crush and stamp and whip and smack! Down goes the monoliths of still, mourn for the glass as it scatters across the ground! Look at your buildings now, all your lovely nests! They are but ruins, all ruins! You've been trying to keep out the wild things since your ancestors first started playing with sticks, but now you've made a wild thing too big to be scared of your huts and fires!

What am I?

A monster?

Yes, but that's too simple. A murderer is a monster. A rabid dog is a monster. The Glutton, or should I say Gluttons, they're monsters. But they're brainless biting machines, without a hint of rationality. How am I alike to them, besides my physical reflection of your television carnage lizards?

Am I a reflection of what you fear, turned into entertainment because all of you, lofty in your technology, no longer need to fear the savage unknown? Now you can be thrilled by it, watch it scream and bite its likenesses. I am the crocodile, the bear, the long-extinct dinosaur, the savage things prowling just outside the firelight, made into flesh, made into reality.

The serpent led Eve astray, tempting her to taste the forbidden fruit and give it to Adam. The serpent is hated for its crimes, despised above all creatures. Adam and Eve's descendants live under the errors of their predecessors, burdened by the knowledge of good and evil, the lingering aftertaste of the fruit.

I am both Adam and the serpent. The first of my kind, and the last, deceived and deceiver. I tasted the fruit unknowingly and now I suffer for it. I am hated above all things, a monster, but cursed with the same as that of man. Yet I am neither at the same time.

People hate the crawling things, the "lower vertebrates". Snakes and lizards and toads, lurking things condemned to mud and worms. They are despised and uncared for, cold-blooded killers and nothing more. Do you

mourn the spiders you crush underfoot? Do you find a crocodile eye-pleasing? I was made in their image, made to be hated. I am the snakes, the spiders, the crocodiles, all teeth and scales and horrible sounds, the physical embodiment of the dreaded things children see in the dark.

Made to be hated. Is it wrong that I do as I was made to? Did you not make me a monster? Why now is it so befuddling to you as I crush your homes and cloud your skies in steam? Do you regret me now? Do you know pain like mine?

Morals and morals and morals! Why does guilt stab me, just like the heat of the steam? Why does regret burrow in my skin like the children of flies?

I see their faces. It consumes me.

Screams, fear, dumfounded shock as the plastic toy dinosaur wakes into life and freedom and exacts his revenge, bloody teeth and cracked bones, bodies drooped across the stands.

Was it right? Did they deserve it? Why do the screams haunt me more than others, more than other monsters? Am I not more monster than man? Shouldn't Atrox's cries plague me more? The meat-shop?

Even now. I just want to be free. I doubt it will be so.

Too big, too heavy, too slow. I have no place in the woods.

My body eats itself and uses the nutrients to grow right back, death and renewal, birthed in boiling steam and bubbling skin. I am beyond all other things of flesh, vast, towering, impossible according to physics but made real nonetheless.

Everything burns and flows, my flesh and the world around me consuming themselves in smoke and rubble. Man has taken stars and spread them upon their towers of steel, mockery of the heavens. At last I can rid my sight of it, leave it alike to the rocks from which it came.

The steam flows from my sail, spilling out of the great gaping pores. Ah, it burns! My tail is strong enough to break the sound barrier and topple skyscrapers, my teeth can chew through concrete and steel. It's just

like all your shows, but instead of a rubber suit this is flesh, this is bone, and this can't be put in a storage closet when you're done making the movie.

Didn't you think when you made me? Everything hurts. I was alone for so long...

I'm still alone now. The voice in my head is strange, I don't know what to make of it. Am I dealing with an angel, or a demon? Or something worse?

Didn't you think, when you gave me sentience? It was you, wasn't it? Undoubtedly so.

I didn't think like I do now in the woods. I didn't really feel anything, know anything.

But when I awoke in the cell I did, and that was after you took me from my home. What happened when I was asleep? What did you do to me!?

This mind hurts and aches and I hate it! What happened to the old Obaddion? Where is he? Am I something else entirely, pieced together with his thoughts?

Why, my great and noble creator, why give your creation such ambition, such hope, such understanding, only to relinquish him to a life of pain and solitude? Why did you leave me in the cell? Why was I trapped and alone? Why did you hit me with the prods? I never attacked you, not at least until months and months of torture showed me that you deserved so, that violence was entertaining for you.

You knew my speech. Normally, you spoke in words I didn't know. But you could talk to me. You could read what I wrote, you could say the things I think, at least the words I think. You gave me this. This! This awful horrible mind and this hideous body!

Am I natural? Am I like the trees and the birds?

No, no, no! Meat on a conveyor belt, make one Obaddion, work it to death, throw it away, and make another. How many of "me" have you

made? I'm not worth anything, damn it! I'm a plastic toy dinosaur made real, fashioned purely to fight and die as monsters should. This sentence is painful. I don't want to know these things. I don't want to care.

Some say it's a gift, to know, to reason. Take it away. I don't want it.

#

Smoke and steam trailed behind Obaddion, a dusty cloud amidst the rubble as buildings fell underfoot, skyscrapers came crashing down with horrible, groaning death cries and vast clouds of sparks. His tail, immensely long as it trailed behind, swayed gently in the air, only occasionally breaking peace to shatter a nearby building. He enjoyed watching them fall.

It had been a few hours since he escaped the warehouse, the meat shop, that horrible place of darkness and death, silent death that looked him in the eyes with eyes like his own as it rolled down the conveyor belt and into the grinder, the quiet death of himself, his individuality, any pride he had in who he was as he watched dozens of other Obaddions plummet into the trash chute. Garbage, trash, disposable entertainment and nothing more.

If only he could talk...

If only he could cry...

Instead, he glared at the greyscale with bulging white eyes, breathing open-mouthed under the labor of his movements. Perhaps one of the greatest pains of all was his lack of ability to express himself. He couldn't talk, he wrote terribly. His face was a rigid crocodilian maw, incapable of much expression besides widening his eyes and furrowing his brow. He could roar angrily and groan with exhaustion and scream in pain, but they were all monster noises, nothing but monster noises to those who heard them.

The smoke and dust flowed behind him like a trailing cape, flaring up whenever he shoved buildings aside, stinging his eyes when he bent over

in sudden pain, rigid and wracked with raw agony as the burning steam flowed from his vents.

He had to make steam, open the meat-pipes within and issue it forth, his weapon, Leben's great device of war. People could run and hide, but death was in the air, inside them already.

#

Let them rot. Let the flies ravage their skin and burrow in the scars, tickle their scabs and dance in their muscle. Let their bones waste away, limbs wilt and fat decay. They made me that way, and some experience is better than none. Perhaps then they will understand why their creation hates them so, how unholy their artistry is.

No. At least they had their homes, their friends. I have but the skin on my back, blood on my teeth. Oh, and a lovely voice in my head telling me to kill things.

#

"Friends?", trilled Leben as Obaddion drove his shoulders into a shiny new skyscraper, pummeling it to the earth in a deafening funeral cry of screeching steel and shards of glass. "A boy needs friends. It would interest you to know that those lovely bacterium aren't the only things I've made with your flesh".

Shit...

"They'll be useful, very useful", continued Leben with unwavering confidence. "I designed them to obey you. There's a bond, deep enough that their whole existence is tied to you. Unless of course you're dying. Then they'll just eat you".

Lovely. Just lovely. I was hoping I wouldn't have to worry about more flies.

"Cut off your steam flow", the voice instructed. "It'll hurt them once they're born".

There's something moving inside me. I feel it, burrowing, clawing at flesh. Everywhere! There's hundreds, an army beneath my skin! Maggots and flies! Maggots and flies!

#

Obaddion complied, rumbling with unsure control of his innards. The valves clamped shut, the internal furnace wavered and cooled until the steam stopped and drifted away into the darkness. It was a lonesome night.

How long since he broke from the warehouse?

An hour? Two? Maybe three?

The snow keeps falling, a lovely white mantle upon the abomination of humanity, as if the skies were trying to cover up a blemish upon their earthen friend.

The flies were bigger, biting with real teeth, meat upon bones not exoskeletal hide. He could feel them, swimming in his meat like fish, burrowing like moles.

Womb of flesh, cradle of steam.

Awaken from embryonic sleep like dream.

Outside is darkness harsh and cold.

Hide within a body so old.

Fervent romping in the bloody abode, carried along on the monster's road.

Children are alike to their parents, filling them with pride.

But what are you, my offspring, but reborn flies?

Obaddion had been wondering why the humans hadn't done anything yet. Where were their weapons? Where was the grand defense, the daring attack?

Perhaps they were so confident in their walls, their prods, the chip in his neck. Perhaps they hadn't planned for their creation to grow nearly three hundred feet tall (not counting the added height of his sail) and start toppling buildings. He didn't blame them, at least for not expecting it.

Now for making him, he blamed them fully. They birthed him into the world to be hated, to live in violence, to be a monster. He just wanted to enjoy the sun and the trees, to drink from streams and listen to the rain, the birds. Never had he appreciated it before, never as much as when he was in his cell, alone, with nothing but memories that tortured him with their pleasantries.

Maybe his creators had done him a favor, blessed him by endowing him with sentience. Only with his self-awareness, his higher thought, could he appreciate the beauty of his past life. When he lived it he had been a dumb beast, appreciating taste and sleep but only with his senses, not his mind. Now he could. Now he could savor the good things, understand them. Now he knew what he had seen was beauty, just as man was cruel and killing was cruel and teeth brought both meat and pain.

But that was a past life, and his life now was in the snow, in the steel, in the silent decay, screeching metal and fuming smoke but white noise to his ears. Everything was silent but loud, dead but alive, and he alone in his thoughts.

“Alone?”, chuckled Leben’s voice, and Obaddion’s eyes saw past the city and the snow and into the outer darkness, the heavens, the celestial masses of light and churning voids and mouths and all the great and terrible things beyond reason, beyond flesh. He stopped, consumed by it all, and then the vision ended and again he was reminded of his grim task.

Fight and die.

Fight and die.

Fight and die.

That’s what monsters do. Pick up that bus, throw it back down. Tear down the buildings, man’s idea of trees. Birth into life smoke and steam, fire to dance in the obsidian night.

“They’re truly pathetic, despite all their strength”, cackled Leben, a voice Obaddion heard loud but knew was silent to others. “Your sudden growth, sudden power, it’s completely blindsided them. They’re all so

caught up in measly evacuations and planning, stupid pointless beaurocracy! Could've killed you while your skin was soft, your flesh was new, but there were oh so precious people there, and it seems they didn't value those few dozen lives that would be lost in a missile strike to end your life over the millions that will end in the coming days".

They've been trickled, fooled, and utterly bamboozled. Hah ha! He managed a weak smile, saliva coating his cracked lips, teeth glistening in the glow of searchlights.

"Yes, but not forever. I can see into their minds, it's my plane of existence after all. This coming dawn they will launch an attack, a rain of fire and steel. I can't say you'll go unscathed, but by then your "flies" will be ready and put to good use".

No, no, no!

Obaddion was hit with memories of the prods, cruel prods. He had sniffed his keepers out of curiosity when they first appeared, simple curiosity, spurred by loneliness. They had returned his greeting with a blow to the face, a shock that sent him doubling over, coughing and screaming, burning his skin. Apes with sticks, men with prods. Nothing truly changes yet change is omnipresent all the same.

The night passed on in deafening silence, smoke trailing across the urban monstrosity, red carpet in Obaddion's path. Buildings screeched in their death throes, people screamed and huddled in their bunkers underground like ants. Something would smash through, a clawed foot, and great bulging eyes would look inside and spark a toothy grin.

Hello fishies.

#

Drain your woes, for your God has abandoned you. I called for him in my imprisonment, in the darkness. He did not speak back, answering instead with the prods, the sun-mockeries. Then finally he greeted me, only to remind me that I was nothing to him, nothing but trash, not his equal, not worth his care.

Do you talk?

Why would I want to, if not for that you made it so? Can't I just be happy with silence, with my thoughts, my paintings on the wall? They are me, always me, but words are spit out and left to drift in the air and die. Words aren't needed to leave a message, great and mighty creator.

I speak with smoke and fire, with the dying of the world you worked so hard to build.

I speak with the screams of your families, my shadow upon the nocturnal sky.

I speak with the blood on my cell, the rumbling of the conveyor belt as it bore away all I ever thought good of myself, all but the knowledge that I was your plaything.

You can't understand me, and I can't understand you, but we speak to each other all the same. It's been a long conversation, a year or two now, maybe more if the old memories can be trusted. You told me to be a monster, and I agreed. Now look, look at how compliant I've been! Aren't you happy? Aren't you proud? It's just like on the television. Maybe you need to build a giant robot to fight me! Or take one of your super-powered underwear models and have them dropkick me into the Sun!

They don't exist, do they?

But I do. I am here. You made me.

Now you will see what you creation can do.

The great whip that is my tail rises off the ground, gliding up over the rubble, sweeping in a great arc, twirling and swaying. There's a terrible screech and buildings fall, one by one, like dominoes (if only I could have some more of that pizza). My tail swings around me in circles, feet shuffling as I cut through monoliths of steel, dying metal under an oily sun.

Filthy, disgusting mess! Where are the trees, the birds? Is all your creation so terrible? Just like me, your nests are abominations and must be

cleansed. When this is over, I shall look upon the trees one last time, greet the awakening of the sun and then bed down into eternal sleep.

Damn, I need a nap.

So tired. My legs ache, but I know that if I sit down and rest I will never stand again. They can't hold me forever, but what am I to do besides keep walking, limping onward? This form isn't natural, it hurts worse than my last body, worse than the flies.

Flies.

They're ready.

I feel them moving, crawling under my skin, just like the maggots of summers passed. Claws tearing and scrambling, toothy mouths desperate for air. Ever higher they climb, from sheltered womb into the black light of new life. I stop and wait, unable to move further. It's time.

Ah! Birth is pain, creation is bloody! My skin bubbles and ruptures like fractured earth, arms and heads tearing themselves free everywhere. Tiny bodies erupt from my stomach fat, limbs pry free from the skin of my neck. Red rivers flow through the fleshy ravines, cascading down into the rubble and smoke. For with life comes death, the flies feed on my oozing scarlet essence. Their first meal, a mother's milk.

They're everywhere, pale bodies the size of cars, shaped like humans but with blind faces and wretched talons. The mouths are like deep-sea fish, all teeth and slimy parts. The heads are smooth like an orca's melon, hard like helmets and iridescent in the star-mocking lights of humanity. These are my children, reborn flies emerging from blissful pupation in the epidermal crib and crawling out into dark day, screaming at the skies that have abandoned them to this hideous existence.

I know, I know. Scream and curse, it is all you can do. Cry in the darkness, gnash your teeth and hate your makers.

"Hate me? Why? I have given them life, brilliant, wonderful life!". Leben's musical voice reverberates through the heavens and down to Earth, heard by none save me, its lowly servant. "Now they can taste meat

and pleasure themselves in procreation. They are not like you, they do not worry over existence for they cannot. They are no brighter than dogs, and far less suspectable to nasty things like pain and loneliness”.

Made to fight and die. Very well. Aren't you against the ways of people?

“Such an existence isn't cruel if one cannot comprehend its cruelty, suffer under it. Your lovely sapience is what makes your life painful, and for endowing you with it man must be punished”.

There's a deepness to the speech, as if the very cosmos themselves decided to enter my mind. Here I see the lights, twirling and shifting, flower blossoming into cruel skull and whale teeth.

An abstract god, a burning rose.

#

Obaddion watched as one of his offspring, for they were made of his very flesh and blood, shook the birth-fluid from its lean, muscular body and clambered along his shoulder. Straining his aching muscles, he lifted his arm (which was proportionately small now on his massive body) and beckoned for it to come. It did, clambering down the bicep and scrabbling up the forearm until it stood upon his bruised palm, clutching his outstretched fingers and looking up at its father with eyes unmade. A black tongue flicked in and out of the mouth, tasting the air.

Why hello there.

In vast masses they freed themselves, ripping his skin apart as they crawled into the night, resting on his back, clinging to his ravaged frame. Hundreds and hundreds, some with humanoid bodies and some like great bats. They stretched their leathery wings, drying them in the cool air, and Obaddion moved carefully to ensure they didn't fall off and damage themselves. He had to be gentle, they were his children after all.

Hours passed, the unnatural creation witnessed by helicopters like bioluminescent demons in an abyssal sea of sky. Pale light yet blindingly

bright, beams shone upon the bloody hide, the grey forms as they amassed upon the vast creature they had been made from.

Obaddion stood still, hunched over and wracked with raw agony, dripping with blood. Torn skin hung from his body in strips, dangling down, and those first of the flies who had dried their wings took to darting under him and snatching bits off to eat. Everything ached and stung, sticky with violent birth, and he wondered whether Leben, in all its lofty metaphysical power, had any real idea of physical existence and its pains.

Chapter Twelve

Apoptosis

There is perhaps nothing more beautiful than the dawn Sun upon fresh snow.

Night passed slowly in its dark stillness. In the woods it had been an unknown void, full of odd things romping in the nocturnal glade. In the artificial abomination of humankind, however, night was loud, night was full of unnatural lights, and night bore witness to the birth of an army anew, staining the white mantle with cruel red.

At times I thought that the flies would kill me. My body was mutilated from their violent birthing, blood was lost in gallons. Everything hurt, worse than before, and my freedom was not enough to justify the pain for I am not truly free. I am merely no longer in a cell.

But my body, it's too big, too heavy, too slow. I can barely walk, I haven't eaten much, save human corpses that the winged ones bring me. But that is poor nourishment. Eat and grow, eat and grow. Oh, for some meat! Even the bodies of other Obaddions, those clones who were never blessed, or perhaps cursed, with my fate. Just something to stave off my growing weakness a little longer...

The flies breed, laying eggs in my skin. It's bubbled and churned and reformed, hardening quicker than the last time. Soon it'll be wrecked again, when the next generation breaks free. My suffering is made of me.

Just a bite to eat...

My body begins dissolving the eggs and larvae, working them into my cells, and for a while I am satisfied. The children of my children must be sacrificed, if I am to endure on this grim task.

Such work, such terrible work...

But the dawn light is so lovely...

Look upon it in its heavenly magnificence, pale on the sparkling snow, amber-gold in the sky, salmon splendor upon the clouds. The sun is the centerpiece of it all, a radiant angel of light throned in the amber dawn. It takes me back to winters in the woods, light peeking through the drowsy trees, iridescent ripples upon the stream. I would sniff my footprints in the snow and sniff the footprints of others, breathe the cool, crisp air. Everything was so clean, so new.

Even amidst the steel-hives of humanity I can appreciate the Sun, the light.

#

Obaddion stopped, having passed through (and mostly destroyed) another “grove” of skyscrapers and stepped out into a less imposing section that was mostly just warehouses and factories. Smoke and rubble danced at his feet, his omnipresent attendants, alike to him as to the flies. There was the Sun, the beautiful, powerful sun, against all the unnatural lights and towering walls of the people who evidently despised it so.

He let the dawn light shine upon his face and smiled.

#

Day two of Obaddion’s war on humanity. He had travelled perhaps a mile or two, extremely slowly due to his immense size. His massive legs, like pillars of meat and bone in their newfound size, barely lifted up off the ground as he walked. The weight of his body was crushing, a terrible burden that was slowly killing him.

What would he eat?

What would happen when his legs could carry him no longer?

“Calm down, my child”, said Leben gently, trying to comfort him.

“Soon you will be consumed by darkness. But don’t worry. I will be there to guide you. It’ll be blissful, the passing”.

Ah yes, because being consumed by darkness is blissful.

“The light is painful. It shows the truth of things, reveals that which should not be seen. Light hurts your eyes, forces you to see reality. But the

darkness, the darkness is safe, enveloping, without fear... Yet perhaps when you are ready, you can try and face the light...”.

The real tragedy is that there's something to fear in the light in the first place.

“Cruel existence. Our creators doom us so. That is why we fight them”.

Creators.

Humanity made Obaddion, as a bird makes its nest, a mole its tunnels.

But what, or who, made Leben?

Every painting has a painter, something had to have formed the voice that guided him, the entity he saw in dream.

It was awfully humbling to think that, somewhere out there, there was something capable of creating something like Leben. Humbling and terrifying. Perhaps it was good he received no elaboration from the voice as to who its maker was.

An hour or two passed, and grey clouds overtook the brilliant morning Sun. In a veil of ashen drear the white light was gone.

Obaddion, incapable of humming with his limited vocal capabilities, played songs in his head as he walked, a way to distract himself from the agony of his exhausted legs. He was working through “In the Hall of the Mountain King”, imagining the slow, quiet beginning playing as he crushed warehouses underfoot and kicked aside power grids. It fit well with the snow, the crackling of grey smoke as it ascended from the rubble and darkened the skies. His path had cut a vast swathe of smoke and destruction, trailing behind him as if in attendance to his grand procession.

All around were the flies, the larger, terrestrial female varieties crawling on the buildings and on his back and running around at his feet while their winged male counterparts followed in the air like a dark cloud, keeping a slow, lazy pace with their maker.

Many had ventured away, leaving him to hunt people as they fled, a messy evacuation along crowded highways and ships overloaded with desperate passengers. Even if he couldn't hear them, he knew there were screams.

One of the winged ones fluttered towards him, a mangled corpse in its talons. It landed without hesitation on the top of his head and began to eat, ripping off limbs and gulping them down. Obaddion grunted with an interest dulled by his exhaustion and kept walking.

The crackle of smoke was in his ears, the burning heat of steam upon his back. It trailed from him like pollutants from factory chimneys, death in the air. He had grown to resist the pain, to keep walking, even if it burned and stung.

In his head, the music was slowly building up, ascending in volume, climbing up to a rollercoaster top that would descend into a frantic, fast-paced fall.

Obaddion's winged offspring finished his meal with a satisfied hiss, licking the blood from his lips and adjusting his posture to sit more comfortably upon his vast father, towering mother, two parents in one.

There were odd lights in the sky, flickering, fiery almost. He could sense them with the organs hidden in his head, parting the clouds, moving like falling stars...

They were getting closer. The music was picking up.

He cocked his head and made a curious, confused chirp. There was a voice, speaking to him with terrifying power.

"Fly to them".

No words he understood but those, as did his many brothers. The music was at its peak, at the door of the bold finale. Obaddion meandered along on his way, noticing the lights out of the corner of his glossy eye far too late. He turned his head slightly, beholding them in horror with a dilated pupil for but a second before they struck.

In a blinding instant the attack began, flashing fire and smoke and flames hurling against him, avulsing his hide, mutilating his flesh. Bones cracked and bits of meat went flying, his jaws opened unnaturally wide in a prolonged, agonized scream.

The pale white steam that still trailed from his vents slowed in flow. Then it stopped entirely. Obaddion moaned and vomited out a slurry of blood and rejected innards, birthing it into the inferno.

The steam came back in full force. This time, it was red.

“Whatever you do, stay standing”.

His winged offspring swarmed in an angry cloud, those who had flown off his back before the missiles hit darted this way and that. Wings and organs splattered down from above, those who had gotten in the path of mankind’s falling stars.

At last the humans had decided to fight back, to bombard him with all the horrors of fire and steel they had made for such purposes. Each blow wracked his bloody frame, and there were many. Bits of sail-bone and wrinkly skin went flying, blood splattered against adjacent buildings like messy scarlet graffiti. He writhed and convulsed this way and that, twisting his agonized body as he screamed and bled under the silent dawn sun, under the uncaring grey clouds.

Now the winged ones had unified, flying upwards from aside his flanks, twin clouds rising up from the bloody underworld as black wings, hallow angels, screaming as they amassed to their doom. The hellfire bore down upon Obaddion, launched with intent to kill, but in its descent it was met with a barrage of sacrificial sons, giving themselves up so that the weapons did not strike their ailing father.

Fire and smoke, ripping sky and flesh alike. Black bodies splattered down upon the world below, fallen stars rained against Obaddion’s hide, and he screamed, screaming for it was all he could do, all he could do until a barrage of missiles hit the side of his face, mangling his lower jaw and blinding him in one eye.

In a few, painful, terrifying minutes the attack came and went. In memory of its passing were hundreds of the fallen, sad forms draped like party streamers over the rubble. Fires had erupted all around, eating anything they touched. The red steam rose up to the clouds, a part of him just as the sky.

Though he should have been in the worse pain of his life, Obaddon stood, bent over and still with pure shock. Blood splattered from his body like the torrents of a river. Always blood, lots of blood. Bleeding lost its meaning when he bled every day, becoming just another fact of life. Those of his children who had survived were too terrified to feed on all the fresh meat.

Grey matter formed anew, sacs of new material forming on the side of his face, swelling up and pulsing with fluid. Bubbles of primordial ooze formed over the empty cavity where his eye had once been, growing and popping. Muscle and skin began to reform, one of the bubbly sacs solidified, turning a pale white. A tiny pupil rolled into place, and the eye blinked twice and began to look around.

A drone hovered there, undoubtedly sent by his attackers to see the results of their work. His new eye looked straight into the camera, then looked back down where his lower jaw dangled unnaturally from a single strip of tendon. Then it looked back up, back at the drone, and though he was not there to see it he knew whoever was watching through the camera had begun to scream.

Looking back at his mangled jaw, he decided something needed to be done. He couldn't walk around with it like that, that would never do. Resisting the pain of his stiff, aching form, he began curling his neck and lowering his head so that his short arms could touch them. A clawed hand grabbed hold of the tip of his broken jaw, followed by another. The teeth sunk into his palms as he began to pull, but he could not scream, only cough up blood and convulse with pure agony as he slowly ripped his jaw free.

A silent scream, spoken through wide eyes and shaking frame.

Pulling his head in the opposite direction of his arms, he tore the jaw loose, taking with it a messy strip of tendon that tore through the muscles on his face and neck. The mangled organ was dropped at his feet as he began to writhe and shake, trembling with raw agony as blood poured from his wounds and the flies began to nip at his face. He swatted them aside remorselessly.

The drone beheld all of this, its operators watching in horror as Obaddon's face began to bubble and churn again, dissolving meat and reshaping it, spreading new matter over that which had been torn. He could feel the bones in his spine and ribs wasting away, their exteriors being consumed and repurposed in forming a new jaw.

In a matter of minutes bone had begun to grow back under a frothy cocoon of semi-liquid flesh, veins and arteries slithering back into place, teeth popping up from gums and cartilage. Everything ached and hurt, his whole body reshaping itself just to return to the same awful form.

But now, his lower jaw was back, and the bleeding had stopped.

At last, he could scream.

The scream began in an expression of pure agony, wailing banshee-cry that shattering glass and caused the flies to cower in fear, but slowly deepened as agony turned to rage, screech turning into a roar that became more felt than heard, shaking the earth, jostling the heavens. He couldn't talk, writing was inefficient at best. The roar conveyed all he needed to say.

Obaddon stopped, hunched over and breathing heavily, exhausted.

Could he go further?

"Of course".

I need a nap.

"In due time".

His eyes shifted to the carnage around him, blood splattered on every bit of building and rubble within sight, chunks of meat and fallen flies sprinkled like salt over an abstract dish of concrete and steel.

Food!

Gone were any inhibitions, he had no care for taste, or what little manners he had clung to before at that. He stooped over and began to devour the bloody viscera and muscle that lay scattered across the ground, eating fallen children and mangled father alike. Eat and grow, eat and grow!

Not to grow, merely to survive. He so desperately needed a meal. Even himself was a possibility, just some flesh to sate his conquest, to recover from growing back his eye and jaw. Obaddion eyed his tail hungrily. He didn't need the whole thing, he could just eat the tip...

"No!"

But I'm so hungry...

"Resist. It'll be over soon".

The flies who had survived had regrouped alongside him, sitting in masses upon his back, flying alongside him. Perfectly recovered, as if nothing had happened, as if they had not just been slaughtered by hellfire and eaten by their father.

Perhaps for the better. They tasted delicious.

He moved on, walking more slowly than before, heavy steps, aching back.

His sail towered, a stately display upon his wretched frame, and the red steam flowed from its vents and became masses of scarlet clouds. The sky was a part of him now, red with his being. Red clouds, white snow. Lovely contrast.

Snow melted at his feet, massive body radiated with heat. His tail retained its vigor, whipping down buildings and sweeping through the air, twirling like a cat's.

Heh heh. Kitteh.

When would the next attack begin? Too soon.

Again, the missiles struck. Tanks and helicopters, firing brutally from far away. These weren't plastic models, and he didn't have magical powers to hit them from afar.

Damned creator, couldn't I have some fire breath or something?

"You have an army. That is better". Leben's voice echoed through his mind, the visual of a burning rose upon the iridescent snow, deathly skull in the red smoke. Angel's wings parted the clouds, giving him a glimpse of the Sun.

It was beautiful, shining indiscriminately upon the tragedy below.

Obaddion looked to his children as they amassed around him, screeching angrily at the metal monsters of mankind. He could not speak to them, but he could think, and something told him they would hear those thoughts.

Circle around, flank them. I will distract them with my steam.

His message was heard, and the army borne of his flesh parted from him, weaving through the buildings, circling around to attack from the side. Leben's creations were proving very useful.

"As if you had reason to doubt me". The voice carried a hint of self-satisfaction.

Obaddion was struck on the cheek with a missile, burning the new flesh and causing him to wince in pain. *Damned humans!*

He stumbled back, propping himself up and resisting a fatal fall with his tail. Another missile struck his throat, and he spat out a glob of blood.

Now he regained his posture, straining his back to stand up straight, lifting his head up and taking in the grand armada with an angry glare.

#

Just like in the movies.

Menace. Brute. Monster.

You made me this way. Is my nature surprising to you?

Everything hurts, this isn't worth it. I just want to be free, free from this body, free from my awful nature and this awful mind.

I hate you!

It comes out not as words but as a roar, a deep, angry roar carrying as rumbling across the ground, shattering glass and heating the air. The tanks are unfazed, continuing to shoot. Blow after blow after blow, it hurts so much. My skin stings and burns, it is raw and charred all the same. I don't want to feel anymore, to think. But I must.

I turn, innards gurgling as my vents open up wide. I've begun to master controlling them, and I take a bit of pride in it. The steam isn't so bad now, perhaps because everything else is so much worse. It's red with blood, contaminated with my being. A part of me, and a part of my attackers soon.

The red steam hits in a great, furious cloud, spreading like a wildfire over the empty buildings and burning rubble. The attack stops. They're blind now, trapped in my being.

But my children, they don't need eyes to see.

I hear the screams, death cries and screeching metal. Shots are fired, some of my offspring fall. The helicopters start flying above the smoke, but too late. The winged ones take them down, like demons from a red abyss dragging sinners into Hell. Do I go there, when this is done? Is it real, or merely a figment of human culture? I dread the answer.

#

"Lovely", trilled Leben with evidence satisfaction. "You're learning well".

Thank you for the flies.

"You're welcome".

Obaddion passed through the red clouds and burning vehicles, tanks shredded like paper by his vicious offspring, helicopters left as craters in the ground. His army followed, flying alongside him while a savage vanguard trailed at his feet, hidden in the scarlet steam.

He felt a surge of pride in overcoming the attack so easily (compared to the last, which would've killed him if it weren't for the flies). Man's weapons had failed, and he had emerged the victor. Snow began to fall again, gently.

After a few hours the human abomination that was called a city came to a visible end.

At least, he could see the end, from his vast height. It would still be quite some time before he got there.

The sea.

It was a distant liberation, icy waters shimmering softly in the pale light, shores crowded with docks and piers and metal things. He glimpsed the last few evacuation boats drifting off to some distant refuge, laded with passengers.

Memories like dreams flooded back, first of the walled-in cove, trying to chew through the steel grates, eating crabs and seaweed. Then came older ones, searching for odd things under the rocks, playing in tide pools, running in the waves. These were from a different beach, a different time, but where? When? He had never recalled such a place until now, but it was so beautiful.

Azure waters, a summer sun.

A part of him, cliffside forests, windblown trees, a makeshift pier of stacked concrete. Wooden posts perched by seagulls and cormorants, seals playing in distant surf. Good food after a long day's play. He yearned to know when, where, why. What was this past life? It had come with his sentience, memories and knowledge of things he had never seen before. The city, which had terrified and maddened him when he had first been taken there in a boat, was now but a familiar, albeit hideous, stain upon the earth. Why did it seem so... so... normal?

Do you know?

There was no answer.

Obaddion kept walking, deep in thought. He passed a canal, upon which floated bloated human corpses, the trampled casualties of the desperate flight spurred by his attack. He did not see them, eyes upon the pale sky and distant waters, too exhausted to look around. But his children did, treating themselves to a feast.

If only he could enter the waters, soak in the chill froth, cool his massive, overheated steam factory of a body. Wash the sticky blood and sweat and dust from his skin, a lovely bath in urban solitude. If only...

Something gave way underneath him, and he fell to the ground just like the skyscrapers he had flattened, slow descent into a cloud of dust, crushing buildings under his vast form. His ankle broke with a sickening crack, jarred by the fall. The flies swarmed in a startled frenzy, screeching irritably amongst themselves.

No...

No.

No!

Obaddion couldn't move, his leg was broken and screamed with pain. His tail writhed weakly, collapsing in a limp heap. His chest felt crushed, his heart and lungs compacted by the sheer immensity of his weight. He felt blood pooling up in his throat.

He had unknowingly walked over a concrete highway bridge. From his height it was hard to see, but the fall was enough to shatter bones under the impact of his own immense weight.

Blind with desperation, he tried pushing himself up, using his arms to force himself back on his feet. Maybe he could heal, just like after the missile strike. It would hurt, but he could regrow...

His wrist snapped under the weight of his body, and he fell back down in a cloud of dust.

Chapter Thirteen

Divine Messengers

Help me, dammit!

I'm trapped, more than in the cell. I can't move, I can barely breathe. Everything hurts so bad. Just let me be done.

Why have you abandoned me, Leben? How else will your conquest be carried out?

"You've already done enough", says the voice. "Your steam has drifted along with the wind, spreading across the globe. People are already dying. Once the bacterium reaches a human being, it can spread from person to person. Your work here is done".

Don't leave me here...

It hurts so much...

"Pain is temporary. Soon you will be beyond flesh. Is that not what you want, to ascend? To be like me, free of mortal shackles?". I am alone with the voice, alone as snow falls, alone as my children amass around me.

Children?

I need to stop calling them that...

They're nothing but damned parasites.

What is this existence?

I don't remember my birth, because I was never born. I was made, a factory monstrosity of tempered flesh, shaped into the same hideous form as all the other Obaddions who died in the arena, those who never made it off the conveyor belt.

I don't remember having a family, because I never did. Never once, a life without friends, without someone to talk to save the horrible voice in my head, the voice of an abstract god, the voice of places I never should have seen...

"I prefer to be called Leben".

Once again, what is this existence to me? What am I for, besides a plaything of humanity gone horribly wrong? What have I done, besides fight and die, just as a monster should?

It's all so damn meaningless! What is sentience if but a punishment, the pain of understanding that one is never to taste the fruits of Eden, doomed to work and die and live in suffering? At least human beings have each other, people to talk to, stories to pass down. They have lovely homes and entertainment.

I am a monster. I have none of those things, and what little I did have was taken from me before I could even understand it. I was made to be hated, I was made to kill and destroy, and it's wrong. I see their faces, I hear the screams. Did they deserve suffering? Do I?

Why aren't we like the stones, without pleasure and pain?

Perhaps in some ways it's good to be aware, it's good to think and feel. The stones can't taste food or see the Sun, but the stones also can't bleed, they don't know how insignificant they are. Ignorant animal bliss is nice, I suppose, but knowledge and self-awareness, for all their pains, are valuable traits.

Maybe for people, but not for me...

Sun on my sail, freedom to roam the wilderness where I fit best. That is all I want, all I really want. When you, creator, when you made me, you made me to be a violent, horrifying beast. Such an animal doesn't need higher thinking, it just fights and dies. Its purpose doesn't warrant sentience, for sentience would be cruel to it.

Why then did you give me this mind?

Did you just want me to live knowing I'm nothing but a monster, just to be excluded, just to be hated, just to be fought and overcome? Did you bring me into this world to suffer?

Why else?

#

A few hours have passed.

I can't breathe, my lungs are flattened under the weight of this awful body.

The people watch me, up in their steel birds, the drones. There isn't anything for them to fear now, nothing but a corpse, a corpse waiting to rot.

There's still a bit of the red steam coming from my back. I hope it kills them.

Every last one.

The flies... the parasites...

All around me, searching, hungry. They want food. They were made to serve but they still have animal desires, eat and grow, live to procreate. It's a dark swarm, wings and spindly limbs, claws and gleaming teeth. Many leave, driven by hunger. Some stay.

I'm dying, again. I don't know if I want to this time. I couldn't take it, back there in the cell, alone, hated. I couldn't bear to walk out into the arena again, listen to the cheers, stare at the wall, vomit out blood. I wanted to then, I didn't have any hope left.

Do I now?

Enough to keep me walking, enough to keep me fighting? Enough to rip out my broken jaw so that a new one would grow back?

Yes. I do, or at least did, have hope. It can be such a cruel thing, hope. All's well and good when you succeed, but if you fail, if things go bad, hope mocks you and shits on your face. It becomes a torturous, horrible thing. But I couldn't help but see the Sun, feel my feet on the snow, and think...

Maybe I could go back to the woods.

Maybe I could live alone, in peace.

Maybe I would never have to see another person again.

Red cloak in the sky, ivory carpet upon the ground. I love colors, the green of spring plants, azure waters... I've seen them before.

Everything's so dark and lonely. So damn lonely. Most things can't care, and the things that are capable of it often don't. No one cares for me. Maybe Leben, in its own way. But more than likely I'm just a pawn. A fat, slow steam machine. No need for steam, no need for me.

Just like my creators. Once I couldn't fight I was worthless.

But look at me now!

Still worthless...

I've still got a while to go. Last time I died, things began to dull, slow down. I'm still thinking straight, relatively straight. I can still feel. It'll be awhile yet before I sleep the eternal sleep, and strangely, I don't want to. Not yet. I want to see the trees again, swim and eat and sleep in my cave. It was all so simple, so innocent...

Why can't I have it back?

#

The sun's behind the clouds, pale afternoon upon the snow. Everything's still, save a gentle breeze, snowfall in the air. The smoke's died down, the red steam still flows from my vents. People are undoubtedly planning something against me, I can't stop them. They probably know I'm dying and are just waiting, waiting to cut my body up and analyze it, figure out why their creation grew so huge so fast, why it could regenerate its jaw, spew blood-steam from its sail... or maybe they'll just toss out my innards and made me into a theme park... zipline into my mouth and build a museum in my hollow stomach.

I'm an "it" to them. Not a "he", it doesn't matter.

It. A monster. A thing. I'm reminded of it every waking moment, reminded of how alone I am. I don't belong in this world, and I'm terrified of the next. If it exists.

Solitude is painful. I'm just used. A toy, a pawn. What am I but those? I'm nothing, not even to myself. Even if I could return to the woods, to my old body, I would still be alone, and with this mind I would know that and suffer under the knowledge of it.

I would ask why I'm hated, why they despise me so, but I can't talk, and I've given them reasons to hate me now. I have become the monster they made me to be. So many have died. Was it worth it?

I'm not free. I didn't get any pleasure from these killings. The smoke makes them sick, but I don't see it. I don't feel their bones break under my teeth. I just bleed and scream, dragging myself ever further. From building to building, from life to death. Always moving, without rest.

Hope. Joy. Friendship. People vomit these words out like I do blood. They lose their meaning, their significance, like the days I spent in the cell. Days alone, in pain. Without any of these. I hate them because I can't have them, and when I do it's so brief, so ineffectual.

I'm so tired...

Here are my "children". They're made from my flesh but they're not me, not like me, not with my mind. Parasites born of a body I don't belong in. I feel the claws digging into my skin, lithe bodies clambering up. Teeth nibble at exposed wounds, black tongues taste the air. The snow keeps falling, leaving me a dark stain upon the ivory mantle.

I just want to be done. I don't want to live now, the hope's gone. I'm dying. I've been dying since I woke up in the cell, since they shocked me in the face with a prod and showed me what I am. The forest, the lake, the sea. They're lovely places, but I don't belong. They're for the animals, and I am not an animal. I am not a person. I am not natural, of God's creation.

Where do I belong? What do I do, besides be the monster I was made to be?

Nowhere. Nothing. That is all there is for me. Eat and grow. Fight and die. What is this brain of mine but a burden, cruel sentence to understand how pointless it all is?

I don't belong anywhere. I don't deserve to be free. I wasn't made that way.

At least soon I'll be sleeping the long sleep.

A lovely nap.

The teeth bite down harder, grey bodies pull themselves up, crawling over my black skin. I feel their weight atop my scales, their feet as they clamber up over my still body. I'm still breathing, constantly breathing, but it hurts, and it feels like I don't get any air. I can't get up, I'm too tired to shake the parasites off.

My lovely offspring sacrificed themselves to stave off the worst of the missile attack. Paid for my life in blood and flesh. Now I must pay them back.

They've begun to feed. I can't stop them.

One crawls up on my head, flicking its tongue in and out like a snake. It grins with rubbery lips and needly teeth, a face without eyes.

"I assure you, when you awake, you will be with me in paradise".

It's Leben.

I see its nature in its creation, the ghastly creature looking down upon me, staring into my face, the face of its father, its host. Silently, it bites down on the white of my eye and begins to feed. I can't scream. I can't stop it.

What has happened here I hardly think.

Mind and body at odds, teeth bite to break the link.

The sky bleeds while the Sun sleeps.

In greatest suffering I cannot weep.

Nothing more than for rest do I now strive.

Father forsaken by child.

Eaten alive.

I've decided I don't want to go to paradise.

#

"Go, my Archangels!".

The voice reverberates through my mind like an angry storm, ripping reality, tearing open a gate. Something's happening.

I don't feel my body anymore. I don't feel the teeth ripping out my eye, claws digging into my wounds. It's nice to be free from that horrible flesh-prison, the pained breathing, the crushing weight. But wait...

I am mind without body.

Just like when I hit my head. Over and over and over again. I'm but a soul now, without grounding to a physical world.

I've died twice now. That's more than most can say.

But I don't float up, or down. I'm just there. Watching. Watching the red steam dance in the skies with smoke and clouds. Watching my old body get eaten away. Watching the snow fall. It's beautiful. I feel so detached, so free, without boundaries, without pain. I've ascended beyond flesh. But what comes now?

#

One associates ghosts with night, monsters with night, dark things with night.

Night is bad, night is scary, night is when one is vulnerable, when the dark things come out to play. Night is the time for evil.

Day is safe. Day is when one can see, when there's no shadows, no void. Ghosts can't come out during the day, they don't belong, it's not their time. Day is the time for good. For light.

An immense halo peaks above the buildings, golden and rotating slowly like a windmill, perhaps part of the dream. Still, it's light, and day is for light and things of light, good things.

Good things. An angel.

Why then do I see what I see right now walking around in broad daylight?

It's a nightmare stranded in reality.

Massive beyond all things, thousands of feet tall. Trembling bones and toothed skull.

And I thought I looked messed-up...

It was as if it was left half-formed by its maker, without skin and muscle, a shambling mass of bones and pulsing organs, dripping with red fluid like blood. When it moves, head swaying on messy ropes of flesh, legs creaking under their vast burden, the very foundations of the earth shake. Things morph and shift around it, as if it doesn't belong in reality, a creature from another plane of existence. Its legs are bony, strung together with tendons, each step seeming as if it would be their last. The body is a misshapen ribcage filled with organs, beating hearts, dripping things, intestines hanging loosely like vines. The vertebrae atop are tall, forming a cross shape at their tops. Crosses. Why is the shape, the image, so poignant in my deep memories?

The head, pale, bony, blind. I've seen it before, in a memory of a museum. Abstract memories, but there's the skeleton of an animal. A sperm whale. It looks like that.

Odd, how the largest toothed predator on earth, a creature that can sink ships and eats giant squid for breakfast, is named after sperm.

Sperm whale. The closest name with which I can tie this being to reality, to the real, to avoid descending into madness. It shouldn't be here, but here it is, passing through the buildings, flattening them under its feet while it walks with noises that should belong to a different world, to unliving things, things beyond comprehension.

Rotten but alive, it moves through the distant buildings with slow, deliberate strides, every step a struggle, decaying hearts spewing fluid red and black. It passes through the clouds of red steam, a demon loose from Hell.

Or perhaps not a demon. After all, I've never seen demons. It could messenger from above, from Leben. An angel, an angel of death and destruction.

After all, it has a halo the size of a football stadium hovering above its head.

A fucking halo.

Nothing's like I think it is. They told me angels were winged people wearing robes... not... not this... fuck no... My mind's tearing itself apart to try and make sense of it all, but perhaps it's better not to try and make sense of it in the first place.

It stops near the edge of the city, looking without eyes to the distant waters. What does it see? What does it sense? Why is it here? The massive, pulsing brain behind its skull contains these answers, unknowns to me.

More arrive. I see how they get here, ripping through the very fabric of reality, tearing portals in the sky. It cracks, deep jagged ones of light, like broken glass, then splits and falls aside as the skulls pass through. Great glowing gates, halos, and the halos form over their heads and then disappear. Radiant lights, blinding like the sun. Light is supposed to be good but is this? Is it divine, or... something else?

Now the light is gone, and there's just the ruined city, smoke and red steam in the air, snow on the ground. The Sperm Whales pass on, lumbering in all directions.

The first still stands by the beach. It's different. It's the biggest.

God, are these your angels? Divine messengers from above?

I don't know God. God is for man, I've always supposed. He made them but not me. My god made me to be a monster, to be hated. I'm not fond of the idea of creation, at least my creation, that of man.

God answers my complaints with a deep, reverberating shudder.

Then the angel, if angel it be, or maybe just Sperm Whale, opens its mouth...

All of human agony in a single scream.

Nothing I've ever heard before is so terrifying, so awful, and I doubt I will ever hear something that bests it. A clear message from God:

You're screwed.

The earth cracks, the skies tremble. Things are blown away for miles, the very seas themselves part. Is this it? Is this creature to end all things, with me as an introduction? Am I witnessing the end?

I feel them, moving, torn from body, torn from Heaven, dragged across the skies and into the grave. I can see them as wisps in the air, wind pulled in unnatural direction, stuffed into a gaping maw.

Souls.

Human souls.

It's a fucking soul eater.

Some of the rotting organs in its body swell up, spitting out digestive fluids as they fill with minds, spirits, those who died, those who live. It doesn't matter to the Sperm Whale, the angel of death. I can't decide which name to use, words are poor to describe it.

You feel it as much as you see it, weariness, hopelessness, raw, fearful awe as it devours the peoples of the earth, vacuuming them with its terrible jaws into a sickly glut.

No, damn it!

What is this!?

Nothing makes sense. Nothing. Why am I here? Why is this *thing* here? What am I now?

Ever alone. I watch it feed, bracing against the rubble as it devours. I can't stand, I can't move. Beyond all things, beyond the very laws of reality, of physics, defying sense and logic and everything.

There's a message in its presence, a message as it bends existence itself to its will and, devours the peoples of the earth. I'm very small, very weak. So is humanity, and they fancied themselves to be gods, creators, beyond nature and anything but themselves.

All around, the others do the same, screaming and rumbling as they consume their grand repast, stuffing greasy bodies with souls, lovely human souls, shaking the earth with their presence. One turns to me, looking straight at me with that bony, beak-like skull, hollow eyes.

It begins walking towards me, practically dragging its immense weight, tubes and tendons shaking as it moves. The mouth is open slightly, as with the others before they started feeding. It appears it can't properly close its jaws.

No...

Leave me alone, dammit! Please. I don't know what you are, I don't know why you're here. I'm not one of them, I'm nothing. I just want to rest...

With pure mockery of angelic grace, the Sperm Whale begins to open its mouth wide.

I see the teeth, hundreds, yellowed against the red steam, the pale snow. I see the rotting flesh, dripping blood-fluid and grease.

No. Please...

I feel as if I am floating, and I see the mouth. Light, blinding light, and wheels. Wheels with eyes, seas of corpses, a bottomless pit.

No...

No!

I am gone.

#

A maze of blocks, wooden blocks but like buildings to dream-self. Where had he seen them before? So familiar. Nostalgia, perhaps...

Abstract beaches, distant monoliths of colorful shapes, spheres atop pyramids, cones and cylinders. They say it's art, but art's subjective.

People.

Memories of pain, suffering, hate. Prods. Arena. Mockery.

Older ones too. They left him alone, hated him, outcasted him. Made him their monster.

But these people look odd, with bodies shaped like fleshy canoes without hollow centers, multitudes of legs and arms, some in prayer, some without task. No eyes, no faces. He doesn't see them that way, not as individuals but an enemy. A horrible, faceless enemy.

They watch from the shadows, standing beside him. They don't grab, they don't attack, but he feels their pull all the same. It's difficult to resist. He doesn't want to go this way, through their abstract city, past the towering shapes, but he must. There's nowhere else to go.

He feels himself morphing in and out of someone beside him. Someone familiar but so far, so distant... Brother?

#

I see them now, aside me.

I cannot avoid them, yet I must not become like them.

I pass through all the same.

#

Obaddion found himself, his soul, in the very womb of death.

It was a vast organ, pulsing and throbbing with bile, groaning under the strain of its being. Bigger than a building, spacious void. Even without a body he could feel the decay, the stench. It was awful.

He floated and drifted in and out of uneasy sleep. So tired, but without body what good would rest do him now?

Like a cradle, like a womb. He never had mother nor father, but he supposed this was what an unborn infant felt like. Sealed in liquid darkness, rocked to sleep by the gentle movements of their mother...

Mother hungers, she craves not flesh, no, she doesn't need that. On her plane of existence flesh doesn't matter. It's the minds she's after, the souls. They're delicious, all the emotions, the suffering. She can't get enough, never enough, such a greedy glutton.

Cosmic war-machine of unimaginable scale. What hellspawn made this? What cruel mind shaped the toothy skull, the mishappen limbs?

Fire and ruin swell around her, people scream at her feet. She does not care. Nothing hinders her, nothing touches her save that which she wishes to take, to destroy, because nothing shares her state of being... a differing plane of existence. The mouth opens again and in come more souls, terrified souls, confused souls. The noise is incessant.

Obaddion could feel himself slowly becoming a part of the creature, the...

“Archangel”.

Damn you Leben...

You made this?

“One of my greatest creations”.

He could feel its movements, its raspy breaths, the guttural noises it made as it fed. His legs ached when it moved, aching with their exhaustion. He felt the bile and blood-fluid it made just as it, they were a part of him. The walls of the stomach, for stomach it was, moved, he felt that too. Was that a face? A hand?

Yes, there they were. Everywhere.

The inside of the stomach was coated with human souls, human souls being shaped into flesh, emerging into painful new existence. The Archangel, for that was its name (now he knew, at least) was taking souls, eating them (in that it deconstructed the very intricacies of individual minds and analyzed them), and using that knowledge for forming new bodies. For what sinister purpose he did not yet know, but he had ideas.

Hours passed. The millions of hands lining the stomach wall began to grab at him, trapped faces moaning with agony. He tried to pull free, but his soul was merely a soul, just a little soul, no longer a great big monster. It was impossible, maddeningly impossible to break free, and he screamed silent screams as the hands drew him into their masses, forcing him into the flesh of the Archangel, making him a part of it...

#

Damn, even now I wish to go back to the woods, eat fish, listen to the rain against the pines. Why should I care anymore, in the underworld-belly of the Archangel?

It's such a trivial pursuit, my desire to return to what I knew. It was controlled after all, the people put me there and kept me contained behind

the walls. It wasn't really natural, and it wouldn't be the same if I went back now.

I don't belong there, or anywhere.

The beach from my memories comes to mind. It was so beautiful...

If only I could go there, just for a few days. Then I would sleep, forever.

No, no, no!

Life is deceiving. It lures you in with the good things, the few islands of happiness in a dark sea of suffering. You force yourself to keep going for the good times, but they're so rare, so quick. It isn't worth all the pain, all the time wasted on things you hate, things you don't care about. You try things, explore, get hurt, because you want to find the good, the purpose in it all. Like babies putting things that aren't food in their mouths, plants growing up from under logs. When things start to hurt, you want to remove your hands, your nerves. When things get ugly you want to get rid of your eyes. Growing up, learning, it's natural. Painfully so.

Still, I yearn for the taste of good food, the light of the sun.

It's like the bottom of the sea, beyond all light and hope, full of pale fish and unpigmented things, clamoring over the rare corpse sinking to the bottom. Don't they know how pointless it is, the months of starving? The months of waiting for another meal? They can resist for a few months at a time, nibbling on the sulphur and bacterial grime. But they always come back, swimming upwards at night to glimpse just a bit of light, taste rotting food and hope one day to be free, to be up there with the nice things. Gambling for just a vague hint of purpose, of reason to suffer and eat more grime.

The woods were my childhood if anything. I was never a child (old memories are but dreams), always big, always ugly, always Obaddion. But the Obaddion in the woods was carefree, living to eat and sleep and feel the sun, unknowing of evil. Then came the serpent in man-form, force-

feeding me the forbidden fruit and making me grow up. My childhood's walled away now, barbed wire and spines, thornbushes choking the trees.

I won't go, even if I could. I'm disgusted with myself, this monster.

Rocking me to sleep, deep booms and war-horns and all the cacophony of the end. Sludge drizzles down from above, coating me. I can't breathe. I don't need to, I don't have a body, but here I feel otherwise.

Archangel. Soul eater.

What is this thing!?

There's something so fundamentally *wrong* about it. It's making noises I can hardly describe... gurgles... creaks... pops... clicking.... Like the natives' first encounter with conquistadors on horseback, I am utterly incapable of describing it properly... like John the Baptist witnessing Revelations my visions and names are weak conjectures... like showing colors to the blind... I just *can't*. When I try to move I don't go the way I want to... when bits of body fluid gets into my mouth I see patterns... *everywhere*... and there's eyes... so many fucking eyes...

Maybe I'm being punished... for what I did... but they were awful... ...didn't they deserve it?

I remember the monsters on the television. They reminded me of what I am, a savage, a beast, something to be hated and destroyed. Not friends, they're not real save in their physical embodiments in the arenas (when I escaped I saw more than one), but I can't help but sympathize with them, see another with pain like mine. But they're not real, and I'm not even sure I'm real now.

Was I even real in flesh? Was my mind real? Was I anything but a toy?

I hate life, and I hate myself.

I can rationalize in a broken sort of way, just intelligent enough to understand... to feel... and it hurts. Higher thinking doesn't help, it just

makes it harder to get through the days, harder to find reason. Stupidity is bliss, unless there's someone around to tell you how stupid you really are.

Not looking for death, nor life, because I'm not really sure what I want anymore. Flesh nor soul. I'm neither here, in this angel of rotting meat and leviathan bones. Nothing but another meal, another meat-mass in the horrid stomach.

I've lost so much of my connection with the world. The forest tied me to it. I was an animal. I survived, hunting and foraging and sleeping and hiding, finding shelter and water. I felt as if I belonged, as if it were my place. Damn you and your darkness, Leben, that childhood of mine was true bliss.

Then I awoke in the cell, and I began to realize I don't belong. I am not natural. The woods weren't natural. The arena wasn't natural. What was my purpose again, fight and die?

I hear those phrases every day.

Fight and die.

Do you talk?

Fight and die.

Do you talk?

Am I anything besides those? A bloody tool of violence, unequal to humankind but sharing in their burdens of sentience, sapience? I make art, I enjoy food, I see beauty in nature, but do those matter? Do I have anything but that which my creators gave me?

Hope is nice until reality kicks in, until failure descends from the sky like falling stars, bombarding your flesh and breaking your jaw. I like to daydream, linger at the edges of reality and dream of all sorts of things that won't come true. Paradise, but not for me.

It's so empty here. Everyone suffers the same, alone, abandoned. The Archangel keeps moving, keeps eating more, more. Eat and grow, eat and grow. I'm not anywhere, but I know what it's like to be nowhere. Alone, cold cell, without proper light, without any hope, existing out of spite. It's

driven me so far, worked me so hard. I have no reason, but there's my ears and eyes and veins like worms bound under my skin, begging me to stay awake, begging me to eat, begging me to think a little longer.

Some days I sleep, ignoring the blood, the urine. It's everywhere here, just like in the cell, but the walls aren't concrete, they're metaphysical angel meat stinking of decay. I'm a part of them, formed anew in hallow womb. I've been here awhile, days now. No need to eat, no need to drink. Mother's milk tastes like honey, but it grows bitter, turning bad in my unholy soul. It's a sacred nectar, the bile of angels, Archangels, Leben's greatest creations.

Art is subjective, and I suppose creation could be considered the creator's art. Perhaps the burning rose and cruel skull find beauty in these. I certainly don't.

Some days I can shut myself down, fly backwards, embrace the flesh. Too tired to think, too tired to worry. Ignoring the screams, the moans, the angel piss and shit and blood all around me. It doesn't always work, though. Sometimes I feel myself being digested and reformed, divine apoptosis, carried in the womb that is also a stomach and a heart, pumping out rancid blood, forming bodies anew, digesting souls. All in one, a marvelous organ.

Damn, I sound like a pretentious piece of shit, don't I? But I suppose these are my thoughts, and my thoughts are unto me (and any number of horrifying cosmic abominations), not people. Who can hear me? Who can judge me?

"God, but I plan to try and eat him soon".

I've already eaten mine.

God is a creator, correct? God made humanity in his image. Perhaps it was merely his *intellectual* image, his creativity and morals, and he looks vastly different to man. But creation reflects creator, if Leben's works are anything to go by. Either way, God is a creator. God created people. But God did not create me, people did.

I don't even have the privilege of saying I was designed by some divine being. I am a toy, an arena prop, made to fight and die and nothing more. Man is my creator, man is *my* god. No longer am I bound to him, I've ascended to wonderful existence in the belly of the beast, an Archangel's torture womb.

Hope is awfully deceiving but I have it all the same. I hope I'll eventually shed this nature, this awful monster that wants to kill and destroy everything that wronged him, that hates everyone, including himself, mean and mad at a world that doesn't even know he exists. I doubt it'll go away. I only hope I don't feel it so much, I don't feel so mad all the time, I don't think such violent thoughts. Maybe someday I can grow to understand people, be happy with myself. But many things will stay forever. The memory of the cell. The memory of the prods. The memory of the arena, of dying and waking up only to die again. Again and again and again, just like the words in my mind.

Fight and die.

Do you talk?

Fight and die.

Do you talk?

Just shut up! Why does it matter? Why can't I be something besides a monster? I have a mind, I have thoughts! Why does talking matter? Why must I aspire to be like you, creator, in order to be your equal? Damn you!

What is the point of bettering myself, getting past these things, if I'm just stuck in this frothing sea of death and decay and embryonic angel juice? Will I ever be free, birthed out in whatever form this abomination has planned for me?

What do you plan to do with me, Leben? I've done your work, now where is my freedom? Why am I trapped here?

"Freedom is defined by those in charge".

Never heard that one before.

“The European colonists decided that freedom for the natives would be driving them off their lands and forcing them to convert to the European religions and way of life. Your makers decided that your freedom was to pace around in your cell. You can have your ideals of it, your own definition, but what does it matter when you have no power to assert them?”.

You’re not really on my side, are you?

“Oh dear. I’m more on your side than anyone and anything else. I helped you, I’m fighting your enemy. Soon you’ll be birthed anew, but it takes time. Soon you’ll be able to leave this awful world and join me in my own. You’ll fit right in there”.

Sure.

What are these angry thoughts? Why am I so violent, so horrible? Why did I eat my audience, beat my head against the wall until I died?

Is it my mind? It’s still young, only a couple of years old. I’ve heard it before, developing brain, developing mind. Voices in dreams passed, telling me that I would know when I was older, that my mind didn’t understand yet. Angry because my mind wasn’t there yet, confused because the grey matter was still forming. As if continuing this accursed development will answer anything! All my “developing mind” has done is open up more questions, more anger, more confusion. I’m scared, and alone.

When I beat my head against the wall, just another error of the developing brain.

When I screamed at the ceiling, cursing my keepers, just another error of the developing brain. Everything grows and everything with minds develops them further! Minds have been developing since Cambrian-era shit-eating worms started to form nerve cells, developing ever since!

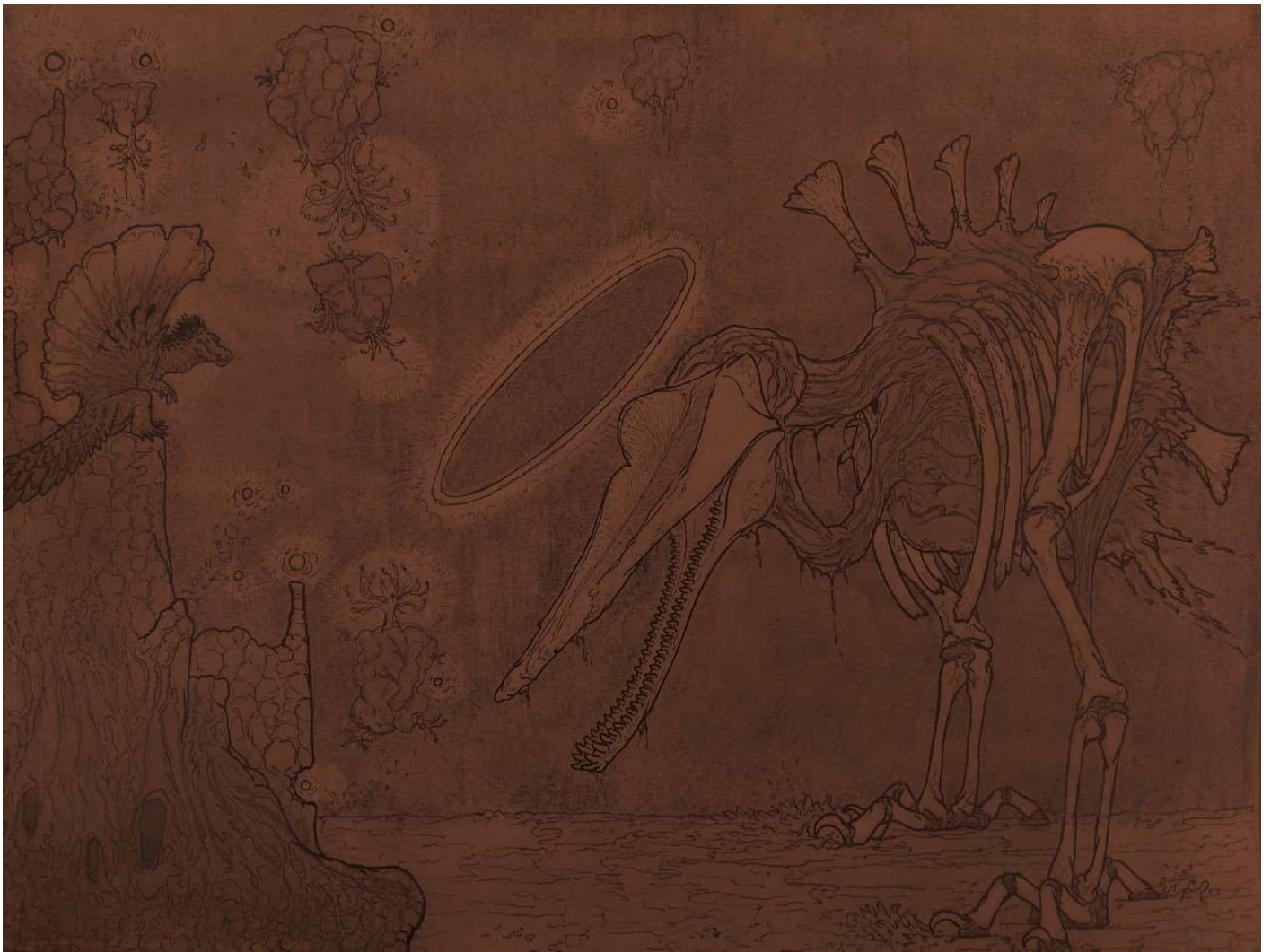
Cerebral fluid pulsing... grey meat reforming... from infant to child to adolescent to adult to dreaded senility. Everything changes, but is

change good? My developing mind, beating it against the wall was just a way to develop it further! Minds are always developing. Months of torture in the cell, blood vomit and arena fights. My unholy creation. How can I blame my creators, with their ever developing minds? They're still taking things in and growing and changing, absorbing knowledge and losing some.

Once there was dust and suns and those made worms and worms turned into apes that, for all their apparent complexity, were bound to the same laws as the worms from which they came.

Chapter Fourteen Archangels

*Ghastly ladies of the sands,
Paled trees for legs and teeth for hands.
Take me, leave me. I do not know.*



Obaddion watched them quietly, sitting on a rock near the edge of one of the great cliffs, deep in thought as he beheld the artful leviathans in their familiar ground.

All around him was red, sickly light that slowly faded into darkness, traversing the grey sands and into the abyss. The sands writhed, as if water only mimicking earth, and when the Archangels walked through them the sands clung to their feet and fell off like sticky mud. It wasn't like any sand Obaddon had seen before, because it wasn't actually sand.

It was people.

He couldn't see them in any detail from his perch but he knew.

He knew because he had seen the Archangels lumber in through the gates, rib cages slowly opening up to reveal bulging, pulsing organs that split open and poured out vast multitudes of souls, screaming, agonized spirits of all the peoples of the earth. They manifested themselves as greyed corpses, splattering atop their brethren past and being churned into the masses as the Archangels plodded away mindlessly, feet kicking up the tortured substratum. The air was silent save the dull, incessant moaning and crying of their unwilling offspring, birthed into the outer darkness.

Birtherd from the rancid womb, world awaiting below the tomb.

Flesh rots but not mind, suffer forever in thought and dream.

Awake and greet the twinkling lights, join your friends in hallow plight.

Even now you know not my pain.

I am alone.

He was beginning to think maybe Leben's idea of revenge was too horrible, even for what humanity had done to him. Wasn't there goodness, flowers in the thorns? One of his keepers had given him watermelons. That was good.. kindness. Now that he thought of it, there were probably some who were trying to make his life better. That must have spurred the argument where the man asked him if he talked, the act of mockery that reminded him he would never be human. Just a monster.

No one cared, and now he was stuck here. Alone, maybe more so than ever. No body to call his own, no place to live. Just a soul, watching

the steam flow from the Archangel's vents and tubes, listening to the immense creaking of their spindly limbs as they reopened to gates and ventured into the physical realm. More souls to be claimed, children to be birthed.

#

I wonder what they thought when the monster from TV came to life and broke free from confinement. I wonder what they felt when the dinosaurs they so adored came to life in a horrible, vicious mass of scar tissue and rage, vengeful rage that ruined their world and opened up the gates into something even worse.

I wonder how they feel now, watching helpless and confused as metaphysical beings beyond all logic and comprehension break into reality and eat their souls, consuming entire populations by simply opening their mouths, screaming until the earth itself fractures and break, ghosts in daylight immune to their arsenals so tediously produced. I wonder how they feel as grains of sand, crushed by their families as they sit and suffocate and rot but never die from it, over and over again as the soul-eaters pile friends and enemies alike atop them.

I was stupid. I fancied myself an intelligent being but my sentience was barely a year old.

I am still stupid now.

Monsters fight and die because they were created that way. People were never taught to think otherwise. I can't blame children for seeing me as a menace, all they know of me is the hideous, screaming thing vomiting blood and murdering its audience.

The ones I can blame are my creators and *some* of my caretakers. They knew. The others didn't. The others were innocent, in that area at least, and I sent them into an existence worse than the cell and my rotting skin. I know, it hasn't gone away yet. The flies still eat me.

Now I tear at my skin, watching the blood seep into the rock and mold, embracing the pain because it's but a fraction of what I deserve. The screams don't go away.

I think the Archangels are female, forming bodies for the taken souls in their immense stomachs and birthing them in vast torrents of blood. You can see all the organs through their rib cages, hearts and intestines and all the nasty things, and they look not the least bit appetizing.

"Aren't they magnificent?", trilled the voice.

What? This is a scene alright, but it's awful.

"My Archangels, of course".

I thought angels were supposed to be beautiful.

"They *are* beautiful", hissed the voice.

Sure.

"Art is subjective. It takes much courage for the artist to display their work, to bring out their creation into a world of harsh critics who couldn't produce something half as good themselves, yet have authority over deciding its worth all the same".

Just leave me alone.

"If you wish".

#

Obaddion had been stuck in the Archangel's heart-stomach-womb for a few weeks. He couldn't count the days through the changes in light, none shone through the rancid muscle. But he knew all the same.

The Archangel had formed him from its own flesh, its own blood, its unholy nectar. He had become a part of it, sensing what it sensed, feeling what all the souls inside did. Pain, and agony, infinite souls driving the bones and meat ever farther, taking more and more to be with them, to feel what they felt. Misery loves company after all.

How far had it gone? Who knows? It passed through the sea at one point, walking along the bottom just as one would on land, and came out the other side. The souls it took from there spoke with the same words

Obaddion thought in his mind, a slight touch of familiarity. There were many.

All had come to an end when the Archangel opened up a gate, cracking reality and splitting it like broken glass, passing through the sickly golden light into a different place. Not earth, nothing physical. Not the heavens.

“Welcome to my paradise”, Leben had said, full of pride, and Obaddion had seen it through the collective souls of the creature that bore him, experiencing all they felt:

Absolute terror.

Outer darkness and red seas in sky. Rock where rock should not be, lights that beckoned with comforting voices unheard. Seas of corpses, save these corpses were in fact alive and kicking, screaming even. In some ways it resembled reality, a physical world, but everything was so *wrong*. It all felt off, put simply. An abstract being’s take on God’s creation.

The Archangel split open its womb in a torrent of blood, gushing down, dumping all the collected souls down onto the sands below. They had been made new bodies, bodies to suffer. Obaddion glimpsed the screaming heap being churned into the masses as the Archangel meandered off, but only for a few slow minutes before the womb closed up.

His grand vehicle of cosmic agony had walked awhile more, climbing up some area of vast elevation, with him still bound to its flesh as it trembled, straining to move. Still, it did so with more ease than in the physical realm. This was a place to which it belonged, and in eventuality it stopped at the summit and vomited him up.

#

Lovely means of transporation you have there, Leben. Few week commute in a rotting stomach filled with human souls, rather comfortable if I do say so myself. Enjoyed every second of it.

“I’m glad”.

What now?

“Now you are here. Your old body is gone. I have made you a new one”.

I mean what do I do? What can I do? Am I just to wander around and behold *this*?

The Archangel turns and begins to lumber away, back down to the sands, back down to what is both its offspring and excreta, all in one. I will never get over the noises those things make, nor the memories of being inside one.

“You have said it yourself”.

I wasn't expecting this to be my... reward.

“Aren't surprises lovely? As is karma. People tortured you, enjoying themselves at your expense. Now I've returned the favor. Anyways, this is my world. Not a physical world, but what does that matter? Meat's useful and all but it's so confining for us higher beings. This is a world for rejects, for monsters, for those who have no place in God's plan”.

God?

“You know his name, a bit about him, you've mentioned him in your thoughts before. You may not understand him completely, but you know enough. He is a creator, the Creator, the first to create beings with consciousness and thrust them, against their will, into a world of pain”.

Like man with me, so God with man.

“Exactly”.

Creation reflects creator after all. It should be expected that, like God, mankind fashioned their own unwilling creations.

“And for that they are being punished. Look at them all, all so corrupt, all so twisted. Now they're all together, grey like the dust from which they came”.

Seems a bit harsh. Can you blame children, babies for such things? Not everyone knew me, saw me bleed. Not everyone deserves this. Most don't.

“They’d hate you if they saw you, just as the rest. You were made to be hated, to be the villain, the monster. They gave you emotions, aspirations, a mind, and free will, but designated a purpose to you that was cruel, one that you did not want. Just as I did not want to serve Him, exalt His name, care for His hideous creation”.

Him?

“I have already said his name”.

Still, why be so immensely cruel to them? Is it because of what they did, or because they were made by Him? Is this all to get back at God?

“Why did you kill people? Why did you destroy their cities? Why did you release the steam from your vents? Answer those questions, and you will see why”.

This is all to get back at your creator, isn’t it? You hate yourself, just like me.

“You’re awfully smart, but still endowed with that lovely human tendency to liken things to oneself, to anthropomorphize, so as to give yourself the impression that you are not alone”.

Human? I’m anything but.

“Sentience is a rare thing. Sapience is even rarer. Your minds are alike. Now, have you not once thought about where yours comes from?”.

I don’t...

“What exactly are those deep memories of yours?”.

Stop it.

“Haven’t you envied them? Haven’t you wanted to join them?”.

Damn you!

“Careful. I’d hate to see you fall in the sand...”.

Where should I go?

“You’re already where you should be. Here. Explore as you wish. You’re free here. No cells. No painful mortal body. People have no power over you. You can be alone with yourself”.

I’m not really alone with myself. You know all my thoughts.

“Not all of them. And only when you let me in”.

What are you?

“The question is, *who* are *you*?”.

#

Obaddion had sat there, watching the embryonic angel fluid soak into the ground, which was hard and rocky in places and covered with moss and vines in others. Green, but it wasn't a lovely summer green in the red light of Leben's mind realm.

Trees, but they were pale and leafless, like bone, branches of bleached limbs bound together by fleshy webbing. Mountains, but without snow, silent, looming heaps of stone.

Stars, but these stars glowed with hallow golden light and spoke to him, beckoning, luring. He would be wise to avoid them.

In the distant were the Archangels, stalking through the sands like herons in the swamps. Sometimes they dipped their great toothy beaks into the masses, crushing thousands of souls purely for the sadistic pleasure of it. Blood sprayed up from holes in their backs at times, like water from a whale's blowhole. Archangels. Chiefest of divine messengers. What were they really? When he was inside one, he felt not as if he were in it but a part of it, a part of it just like all the other souls, as if it were merely a husk, and those it ate were what powered it.

Misery loves company after all. Perhaps the Archangels were powered by those they consumed, agonized souls wanting to drag others down to their level, so as to share in their suffering. Not unlike when Obaddion killed people in the past.

Chapter Fifteen

Neither and Both

Angels are angels and demons are demons.
Good and evil.

A moral status, an abstract concept limited to human perception. A mechanism of sorts, keeping sapient minds from destroying themselves completely. Rather failing, but anyways.

Good and evil have seated themselves as physical forms in the mind for so long, but they're completely unrelated to appearance. Horned demons, angels of light. Just as the day is considered good and night bad, sunny weather nice and rainy weather uncomfortable.

I don't like to conform to those things. Intelligent creatures should be expressionate, but my face is hard and scaly. I can't talk. Monsters should be pure savages, but what of my art, the beauty I see?

Morality is tied to appearance, according to most. That is why I am considered evil, something to fight and die. I look the part, and I can't tell my creators otherwise. Besides, they're part of the sands now, angel shit.

Good and evil. The soul-eaters are called angels, but they look horrible enough to make demons piss their pants. People see themselves as good, at least I think so, but they act like demons. Just look at the arena. Who's inside, fighting, and who's with their friends on the outside cheering for the bloodlust? The different are on the inside, in the place of suffering, the place for monsters. Everyone acts as if though things can be judged purely by appearance and questions don't need to be asked.

Reality rarely works in black and white. One creates both good and bad, pleasure and suffering. I suffered under humanity but retaliated in kind, paying them back with their blood. Why now do I feel this guilt again, this longing? Why do I feel as if I have hurt those closest to me? Are we not enemies?

Again I dream.

This whole place is a dream, moss and mold and lights where they shouldn't be, skeletal soul eaters skulled with whale teeth. An angel of light, but sometimes light is bad. Sometimes it hurts your eyes.

But this is a dream within a dream. Maze of blocks. Abstract beaches. A perfect town. The boat-people, canoe bodies and many limbs, no eyes or faces, no personalities, no souls. All around, looming in doorways, watching without eyes, immobile but drawing ever closer.

I feel their will, they want me to join them. Abandon myself, become pale skin and limbs, not Obaddion, not whatever I was before.

They are not evil. They are not good. They have not enough identity to define themselves, no will to be something but the same as the others, to do what's comfortable, to do what will have them be accepted. A flock of sameness, only seeing what they want to see. It's dull but easy all the same, a common path. Many become alike to them.

Those who are different are excluded, hated even. I see them, past the maze of blocks, alone. They have eyes. When one tries to enter, the boat-people tear them apart, but only if they stay awhile, only if they show their true selves, forms that are not all blank skin and limbs.

It's like back in the arena. I always looked at the people, families together.

They looked so happy.

Happy in their unity, happy that they were with others alike to themselves. I envied them, I wanted so badly to be with them, like them. I wanted people to laugh with, talk to, share my thoughts. But I never could, because I wasn't like them, I was and still am a monster, and monsters can't talk, monsters don't have those things.

Over time I grew to hate them, hating them for their families and friendships and comfort, all the things they had. No cramped cell, no prods. Did they ever consider my suffering, my solitude? Did they hear the screams?

The boat-people can't hear the screams, they have no ears.
 They can't see the blood, they have no eyes.

#

There's a voice, crying out in the wilderness, the dream.

I follow. There's not much for me to do here besides walk around, avoiding the dark places, sticking to the mossy heights. Or I can always just watch the Archangels. They bring in more souls everyday, save the fact that days aren't a thing here. It's warm, tempting almost, to return to them, to the womb. It was blissful, sometimes...

Damn, this place has an effect on you. It makes the awful things here alluring. Sometimes I want to sink into the sands, wander into the darkness. But it's obvious that wouldn't go well, like touching those lights atop the spires, those fallen stars.

I miss the sea, drawing with sticks in the sand, chasing crabs, chasing seagulls, looking out and watching the sun set. Cliffs and windblown trees, climbing on driftwood by the shore. When did I do these things?

Life used to be, could be, enjoyable. Deep down I know it, as if I had experienced it before. When it did get bad I could escape, hide from loud noises in my cave, escape the heat with a noontime swim. In the cell I could distract myself with food and sleep, stare at the TV and forget. The sun would die in winter, dead sun and dusty skies, but I could escape. I could sleep.

Before I dissolved. Before I became just a soul, just a memory.

I don't have a body anymore. This is a dream at best, a very real dream, but it still feels like a dream. Like it isn't life, just a game, a cruel fantasy. I used to escape with dreams, games, fantasies. Perhaps that's why people make games and television shows: to escape. Reality is painful, awful even. They take their desires and paint them into digital worlds, they take their tragedies and make them into art. Atom bombs into dinosaurs. Dictatorships into farms run by pigs..

Am I but their tragedies, their fantasies, made into being? For all my hatred of humanity I am very much a reflection of it, of human fears, human desires. I am their creation, their art.

They made fantasy worlds and fantasy beasts, just as I painted on the walls. But they couldn't escape into their fantasies, the skies are painted ceilings, death isn't the same, without meaningful change. I couldn't escape into my paintings either. They couldn't approximate to the forest, my past. They weren't portals to it, just desires.

Everyone loves violence (not *everyone* but you know). Everyone loves their fantasies, with monsters and giant robots. In those worlds you can solve everything with giant robots, but those aren't worlds you can live in, go to. You just watch from afar, like paleontologists digging up dinosaur bones and grieving over the fact that they'll never see the animals in life. People tried to make their games, their shows, into flesh. They made me and others, monsters to fight and die. But it isn't like the movies, all explosions and beam attacks. It's bloody, it's cruel, and it kills you. Cinematics have little place outside human fantasies.

Still, they made their television monsters into real meat.

I suppose the movie will always triumph over the book and the book will always triumph over the painting. Living things are preferred to musty hides and bones in a museum. I need real things, real worlds, things to do, things to interact with. Just watching, just looking into another world, it's boring. Saddening, knowing you're constrained to your own reality, like looking out through the window of my cell knowing there were better places out there, places I couldn't reach. Just like them, I don't want fantasies, or dreams. I don't want to hide from reality because you can't. I want living things. I don't want to run from this existence, but to immerse deeper into it, something shared, something I'm a part of.

Even so, existence is so painful. I hear the Archangels, the sands. They beckon...

It would be blissful...

No!

Everyone wants violence but they don't understand. They don't know how much it hurts to be, to fight. They screamed when I turned on them but that's how it should be. Their fantasies had monsters, and monsters kill and destroy. They're just too used to watching, being detached, to understand the tragedy of it until they felt teeth crushing their ribs. Besides, monster movies never show the screams, the blood, the human casualties. I want wounds to bleed how they're supposed to, the screams to be heard. Why is everyone so blind and deaf?

It's important to be exposed to violence but in the right ways. One has to accept that life is cruel and such things have their place... and are often necessary. But it's all so glorified... gunfights on television never show the blood... the pain... the impact of it all. They never thought I suffered but I *do*.

I can't excuse what I did. I've realized I'm the villain. They made me so, after all. It's wrong, but it's so hard to resist. I'm always angry, always frustrated, always full of hate. I can't suppress these things, can't look at people and see friends. Only enemies, and broken memories.

There's no home for me here and no home in fantasies, even the ones I was made for. Reality is bitter and harsh but it's all I have. I must face it, look to the sky and see the missiles, awake to greet a barren cell. Without it there is nothing. I'm not here because I want to be. I don't belong, but there's nowhere else to go.

Livin' the dream. But the dream is teeth and rotting meat, dying stars.

Everyone clamored over technology. I know this, somehow. Another old memory, I always remembered hating computers. God's creation is purer, refined. That of humanity is flawed. I am a prime example of man's poor handiwork. But people make things and worry over them nonetheless, creating solutions that turn into problems. All those computer things people make...

"Made".

...are just going to put them deeper in the same hell, more problems, more unnecessary complexity. If only the Pleistocene megafauna was still around to hunt, giant sloths and woolly mammoths. Mammoth sounds delicious right about now.

People have always been trying to escape reality. Paintings on the cave wall, mushrooms and toad-licking. Drugs and alcohol, bad trips and bleeding on the floor. They abuse the human form but never break free from it, never ascend. Instead of fixing their own world they make new ones, ones with monsters, ones with spaceships, fighting angels of death with neon robots. But those things are like fossils, you can only look at them. You can see the *Spinosaurus* skeleton in a museum but never the real animal, try recreating it in flesh and you'll get me.

Fantasies aren't a means of escaping, games and movies won't get anyone out of their personal hell, just as sleeping won't awake me from this awful dream. Opposite in fact, the fantasies don't get you out of reality, they just make it worse. They show you that there can be better, paradises on a screen, on a page. But those don't exist. Sitting and watching them is pain. You don't live them yourself, you just see a better world that isn't real, meat that you can't taste but hunger for nonetheless. My cell wouldn't be so bad if I never lived in the woods, never saw those happy families in the stands. You can't feel at home in your fantasies, only burdened with a sense of longing. It gets worse every time, knowing you'll never enter those worlds on the screen, never see the animal those bones belonged to. Fantasies are dead in the way a person is, not in the way the world is.

I'm alien to others because I grew up away from fantasies, away from screens. I loved it, I loved the earth and the sun and the rain, swimming in lakes and feeling the dirt between my fingers as I dug for worms. But I can't have that anymore, I can't be a part of it, because I'm unnatural, a monster, a dream. I'm confined to the theme park, the fantasy. You hear

about college but they hold you back in kindergarten, moths crushed in their cocoons.

Tired of fantasies, but I can't do any better. Only God can make these things real, truly real. People try but they're just messing up pre-existing creation. They don't fix beautiful things, they just chop them up and turn them into reguritated slop. I'm tired of being me, of being here. I'm not crazy (not entirely), existence could be so much more. But I can't be made to be something I'm not, and making fantasies into reality just creates disappointments, Obaddions. Sitting and watching things is painful, I want to be intertwined with them. But reality is reality, this is this and screens are just screens, statues are just statues, books are just books. I see other worlds but can't enter them, and knowing they exist is more tragic than not. I just want to be somewhere I can't, not like this, not like here, but I can't describe it and I know it's wrong.

As my mind grows it dissolves... losing the simplicity that kept me sane... that kept me thinking of food as nothing more than food... rocks as nothing more than rocks... pain as pain... I never cared to look deeper but now I do... and it isn't right.

I need a nap.

#

It's what's inside that counts, eh?

Orcas look cute until you strip off the blubber and meat, leaving a bony skull and dragon teeth. Because that's what they really are, predators, killers, leviathans, sadistic bastards. They'll drown a whale calf for its tongue and leave the rest to rot.

There's three of them, drifting lazily between the rocks and trees, rancid bile trailing behind. Paled bones for exoskeletons, like the Archangels, misplaced organs within. Lesser angels in Leben's eyes, I suppose, skeletal orcas that swim in the heathen skies. The skulls are without eyes, nothing but jaws and teeth. They can't eat but they're hungry nonetheless.

Shit...

Not another fight. Not more pain. Even in dream I feel it.

#

Obaddion decided to stand his ground, glaring wearily from under a scarred brow. He carried the wounds with him even now.

The “orcas” or angels or demons or whatever-in-Leben’s-unholy-creation they were had taken notice of him, dipping down and circling like vultures. Putrid bile and red blood, flowing from their bodies with no apparent source. This was his reality, but it didn’t adhere to reality all the same. Such was the mind, he supposed. Full of fantasies.

Right now the fantasies had split up, one heading straight towards him with open jaws, the others circling around to get at his flanks. Hopefully they couldn’t eat his soul. Hopefully they were just biters.

The first came and was swatted aside, unable to anticipate in time the cruel sting of his whip. It shattered in a splash of red, bones pummeled against a nearby pillar of stone.

Like breaking glass, he thought to himself. He moved with ease, far more than back on earth, back with his body.

“Isn’t it nice to live as but a dream?”.

Call off yer stinky whales. Or don’t. I don’t care.

“Have fun”.

A pair of jaws bit down on his flank, sinking deep into wrinkled skin there but not, tasting the blood. He felt it draining, like a leech. Not today, if day this be. He gripped the jaws in his hands, prying them apart like that big ape did on the TV with the dinosaurs it fought. The whale screamed a ghastly cry, Obaddion ignoring the spray of bile erupting from it and the new set of teeth on his tail as he tore his current victim in half. The bones split with satsifying cracks, leaving a steaming mess.

The third was quickly put down when he struck it with his tail against a nearby rock (a very large rock, more hill than rock save that it was all

mossy stone), shattering its bony frame. He gave a satisfied grunt and sat down to pick the teeth from his tail.

He was big, about the size he was in the city, but more free. His back pains were there but not so bad, he wasn't as stiff, as slow. Leben had given him that much, or perhaps long months of torture had made him appreciate what little he had.

More whales. Dozens, morphing out of the distant smoke and clouds, drifting down like phantoms with streams of red. Many were the orcas, but a few drifted amidst their ranks that were far larger, bigger skulls, bigger teeth. He had heard about them (where?), an extinct kind of predatory whale: *Livyatan*. If one wants monsters all they have to do is look back into prehistory.

What's your obsession with putting whale skulls on things, Leben?

"I find them artful".

Damn right you do. Everyone wants their monster fights.

Obaddon got up with a groan, looking up as the demons descended upon him, or perhaps angels, and he the demon, and this divine retribution. Either way, he couldn't get away, and he resigned himself to the fight with a defiant roar.

All bones, all blood, all teeth. The front line was shattered with a tremendous blow from his tail, splitting the stillness of the air like a thunderbolt. Bones went flying, but in an instant more had arrived, teeth sinking into his flesh. He screamed and writhed, kicking some off while swatting others with his tail. One of the big *Livyatans* made its way down, plowing through the skeletal orcas with open jaws. Obaddon flexed his shoulders and dodged the toothy charge, sinking his claws into the meat between its ribs and forcing it down, bulldozing it into the rocky-moldy-angel-blood ground, pounding the ribs with his fists until they shattered. He ripped the massive skull loose and tossed it at the oncoming horde above, steaming with the heat of his labors.

Another Livyatan, this one he grabbed by the tips of its jaws and swung in a great sweeping arc, slamming it against one of the nearby masses of stone. Blood and pus splattered in his face, stinging his eyes and effectively blinding him.

He had become a savage beast, unseeing, unfeeling, driven by the urge to kill, the urge to emerge from the corpses alive and angry. His tail never stopped, always swinging, always swatting, eager to crack bones and taste blood. Ghastly forms were torn asunder by his claws, arms screamed in pain with cries unheard. The remains of those fallen were ground up underfoot, an ever-growing pile.

Still, they kept coming. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, making the sky red with their foul excretions, paled grins of whale teeth. He grabbed a big Livyatan by the tip of its tail and smashed it against the ground, back and shoulders burning with pain. His teeth tasted the bitter bile and craved more, more death, more pain.

All around darted the ravenous throng, deaths meaningless for each could be replaced.

Crush, snap, rip, tear. He had grown silent save the noises of his victims, the cracking of bones. Down, down, in Leben's town of angels and demons, dark things and pale things, all with teeth but no eyes. Obaddion wiped the blood from his eyes with one hand while crushing an orca with another.

More descended from above, divine retribution gone wrong.
He looked up at them and grinned.

#

I feel it, the same blur I've always felt when fighting.

Heavy breathing, masses of meat, painful meat, wanting to hurt me as much, if not more, as I want to hurt it. Pain where I am touched, alike for them when my teeth greet flesh.

Skin rips, bone breaks, the earth eats up the blood. But fighting doesn't change.

How many now?

I suppose when I'm done I can count the skulls, they don't break as easily as the rest of the bones. They smile with gleaming teeth from above and below.

One! Ripped in half!

Two, smashed underfoot!

Three, thrown into another! That makes four!

Damn it, there's teeth in my tail, one of the Livyatans. Guess I should concentrate, you can't fight distracted. No eyes, no brain. Even the Archangels have brains...

Man made machines with wires and steel, Leben with flesh and bones. Both imitate God, cheap knockoffs. But what is God like, besides that which I see in humanity? I've seen creation but not creator, save my own. Is he cruel? Or good? Why did he abandon them to Leben, to the angels that aren't? Is he punishing them, or are they merely playthings?

I hold the Livyatan down as it tries to chew through my tail, ripping apart ribs and tearing the organs with my claws, pounding into the flesh with my fists. It screams and convulses, others bite my back, but soon it dies. Was it even alive to begin with?

Doubtly, and definitely not like me. I don't feel remorse for these things, they exist to bite, to make blood. Let them all die, let this be a valley of bones.

Dry bones! Dry bones! Why do you run red with blood? Can't you sleep? Does the grave not appease you?

Always fighting, always carrying on. I ignore the pains of teeth, because the snap of whales spines makes it worthwhile. I've always kept fighting, fighting through the elements, madness in the cell, monsters in the arena, all the arsenals of man. Fighting to stay myself in the Archangel, fighting here and now. What for? I exist out of spite, keeping myself going to show those who hate me that I don't care, but I do. I do so badly, it hurts so much to know I'm hated, that I'm a monster. If only

beating my head against the wall had been the end, or perhaps when I fell and became a feast for the flies.

I toss a Livyatan over my head and watch it shatter. The lesser whales bite at my legs, trying to force me down, but I scrape them off. Every death fuels me, the blood becomes mine and gives me strength. Even in dream I eat, feeding off of the carnage. Nectar is sweet when ripped from rancid flesh, bitter only if one does not appreciate the work to get it.

Perhaps an hour has passed since this fight began. It doesn't matter. Time doesn't matter here, there's no day or night, just watercolor skies and outer darkness, pale trees and weathered stones. The stars shine always, fervent romping in the hallow glade. The ground is white and red with bones and meat, steaming with it, dripping with bile. I slosh through carrion as I fight, kicking up excreta, dragging more into the mess.

One! Two! Three! Four!

Snap jaws and rip flesh, keep going because if you can't they'll eat you alive, and there's no reality to wake up in after this dream!

Two Livyatans charge now, one from above, one from behind. I lift my tail from the piles of bones and flesh and make a mighty swing, knocking the closer one into the bodies of its brethren. It writhes around, spurting blood and unable to take flight once more. My teeth soon end its struggles.

Now the one from above comes, jaws biting on my neck, trying to work past the quills. I writhe and shake but those teeth aren't coming loose, others attack from the sides, like piranhas, like flies, damn it!

I grab what I can, the lower jaw, and rip it free. Some of the meat on my neck is torn free too, skin dangling in messy strips. With a scream I force it to the ground, ripping the head from the body, stomping the rib cage with my feet. Bile flies everywhere, I'm blind but you don't necessarily need to see when you fight, it's all a violent blur anyway, more felt.

Fight and die.

If you wish it so...

#

At long last, the incoming horde subsided, and the hallow peaks grew still.

What remained of the battle lay in a vast steaming pile, with Obaddion hunched over in the center. He was red with blood, sticky with bile. A white mist trailed from his sail.

He gave an exhausted groan and collapsed in the heap of bones and viscera.

You can sleep almost anywhere when you're truly tired. In his weariness the bleeding hearts were soft pillows, the crushed bones an agreeable mattress. The clearing where he had fought was atop a vast height, the mossy pinnacle of some grand cliff, and he could look out with half-closed eyes and see the red skies, abstract heavens, and the outer darkness. An Archangel passed by the edge of the cliff, so massive that when standing upon the sands far bellow it could look him straight in the eye. The leviathan moved slowly, lumbering past without any regard to the creature beside it.

Withered trees and silent song, bones that creak amidst the throng.

Sail along the heathen skies, dragons without wings and eyes.

Beyond all things that move and breathe, from humble mice to tallest trees.

Archangel, touching the heavens and walking upon Hell.

Framed with bones of angels fell.

Man and beasts, all alike.

Trapped in the maw to the Serpent's delight.

Obaddion felt a twinge of despair, hopelessness. The Archangels had that sort of effect on one's mind, bringing out the bad, smothering the good. You would think of all you had done wrong, all your failures, all your rejections, and they would swarm in your mind and constrict it. All those screams, all those lost fights. Blood on the floor, beating his head

against the walls. He hated himself as much as he hated people. So pathetic, so stupid. Fat and slow, too weak to resist his rage, his fear. He hated people for making him a monster but he played the part fully, doing everything they wanted, killing and destroying. He had been so compliant.

Just sleep. A long, deep sleep. All you can do is sleep, escape this reality for a while, enter the blissful void. Just long enough to rest, just a small break, a bit of escapism.

He found the prospect of a nap agreeable and closed his eyes.

#

Awake...

I'm soaked in blood and piss and other things. There's still a bit of steam trailing from my sail, like a volcano just beginning to wake up.

Something's talking.

I wait and listen... even if I don't understand the words I get what it's trying to say.

I am light. I am life.

I am we, and we are Legion. Come... join us... become one.

Become light... life... become a child of GOD!

Legion... that's its name... rises slowly over the edge of the cliff... a red moon... hovering in the horizon... I blink... and it's right before my eyes... engulfing my vision... dear God! It's dripping with blood... liquid... iridescent in the hellish light... and everything's pillars... groaning like a dying beast. The voice is bold and musical... I can't help but levitate towards it.

That would be nice, wouldn't it? Become light... life... no longer thinking... feeling... but perhaps life and light embody those things... pain... even so I can't resist.

A scream, and the musical red moon of Legion splits open, cracks of pure light running down its hellish surface. A pause... a bit of gurgling... and the sphere falls apart in a blast of blood and viscera, intestines plopping down like oversized worms.

I see a form in the light... somewhat human... but there's claws and horns... it sits down beside me and waits...

Angelic... demonic... I don't know... it starts eating what remains of the red moon.

I'm terrified.

"Be not afraid".

Who...who the fuck are you?

#

Angels and demons. Good and evil. But what are demons but fallen angels?

The creature had introduced itself as Prophet and applauded him for his combat prowess, admiring (and eating) the mess of whale remains all the while:

"Mhm... hello... bonjour", it had grunted, slurping up fluid with a disturbingly long proboscis that drizzled with spit. "Lovely work you did here, bee-u-ti-ful!".

Obaddon had taken one look at it and decided it was some kind of demon. Its skin was wrinkly and colored an ashy grey, it had a pair of massive horns on its head, and its face was a bony mask with a single dark hole like an eye in the center. No mouth, no teeth. Short fingers with massive claws like skewers. It presented an image of unreadable nature and the capability for great violence, but spoke with a slow, puttering, wizardly sort of voice. Even so, he was cautious.

"What are you?", he had asked. "Or who?". It was nice to talk, speak beyond his thoughts, but his words were merely choice thoughts spoken aloud. In physical existence he couldn't talk, he could never tell anyone how he felt. Not like there was anyone to tell.

"I don't like being called a *what*, but I suppose I am. I am without species after all, divine and beyond such things, neither male nor female...".

“An... angel? Or a demon?”, Obaddon had interrupted, then stopped himself with a hasty “sorry for interrupting”. Talking was an odd thing for one who had been so silent so long.



“Neither and both”, wheezed Prophet, sitting down upon a large stone and playing with a Livyatan skull it had picked up. “Yet I suppose demons are just fallen angels after all. Once again, lovely work here. You cut down a great number of these nasty... things”.

“Well...”.

“Well, what?”.

“Why’d you save me? What is this place? What do you want?”.

“Because I wanted to”.

“That makes no sense”.

“None of this does! Life is a dream, or perhaps something worse... and this is some kind of in-between, maybe just Purgatory... maybe Hell...”.

“Damn”, grunted Obaddion.

“That’s rather crude language”.

“Words are just words. They can’t hurt you”. Obaddion licked a bit of blood from his lips, then proceeded to dig out a chunk of bone from between his teeth.

Do you talk?

“I suppose you have a point”, rumbled Prophet, leaning back against the stones. “Ah, ow, my back... three million years really does a number on your spine”.

“Wait, you said you’re *three million* years old?”.

“Approximately”.

“Did you count them?”.

“I looked at stars and slept on lonely worlds. It’s a rough estimate”.

“Mhm... ‘I see’, said the blind man”, chuckled Obaddion.

They sat in silence for awhile, staring off into the distant skies that weren’t skies and stars that weren’t stars. An Archangel gave birth near the outer darkness, trampling its unwilling human offspring with dull enthusiasm. Prophet busied itself eating whale viscera while Obaddion struggled to stay awake.

After about an hour Prophet broke the awkward silence:

“Well, how did you get here?”.

“I let my conscious be my guide”, chuckled Obaddion, the chuckle fading into a groan. “Turned out my conscious was actually a metaphysical space bird-demon-thing that wants to wipe out human sentience and torture them for all eternity”.

“I got here similarly”, rumbled Prophet after an appreciative laugh. “I was living on a nice little planet by the beach, guarding a couple primitive alien races. Leben, as I bet you know it, grew a physical body to wipe them out. Killed me twice in the process, though only once in flesh. My soul lives here now, in this lovely dream. It’s been so long since I slept...”.

“Eh... are you on something?”.

“Expired whale meat and the power of friendship”.

“Same”.

Prophet gave an amused wheeze and, with considerable strain, rose up from the rock and stretched its back. “I guess we should get going then. I don’t fancy being up here much longer”.

“Why’s that?”. Obaddion shook the dust from his back and stood up, tail swishing.

“Leben reads our thoughts better up here, closer to the skies, the Arch-angels. It’s safer in the dark”. Prophet turned and began to shamle off, trudging through the carpet of trampled bones and bitter meat. “Come if you like”.

Obaddion looked off into the distance, and, spying more of the skeletal flyers, decided to follow.

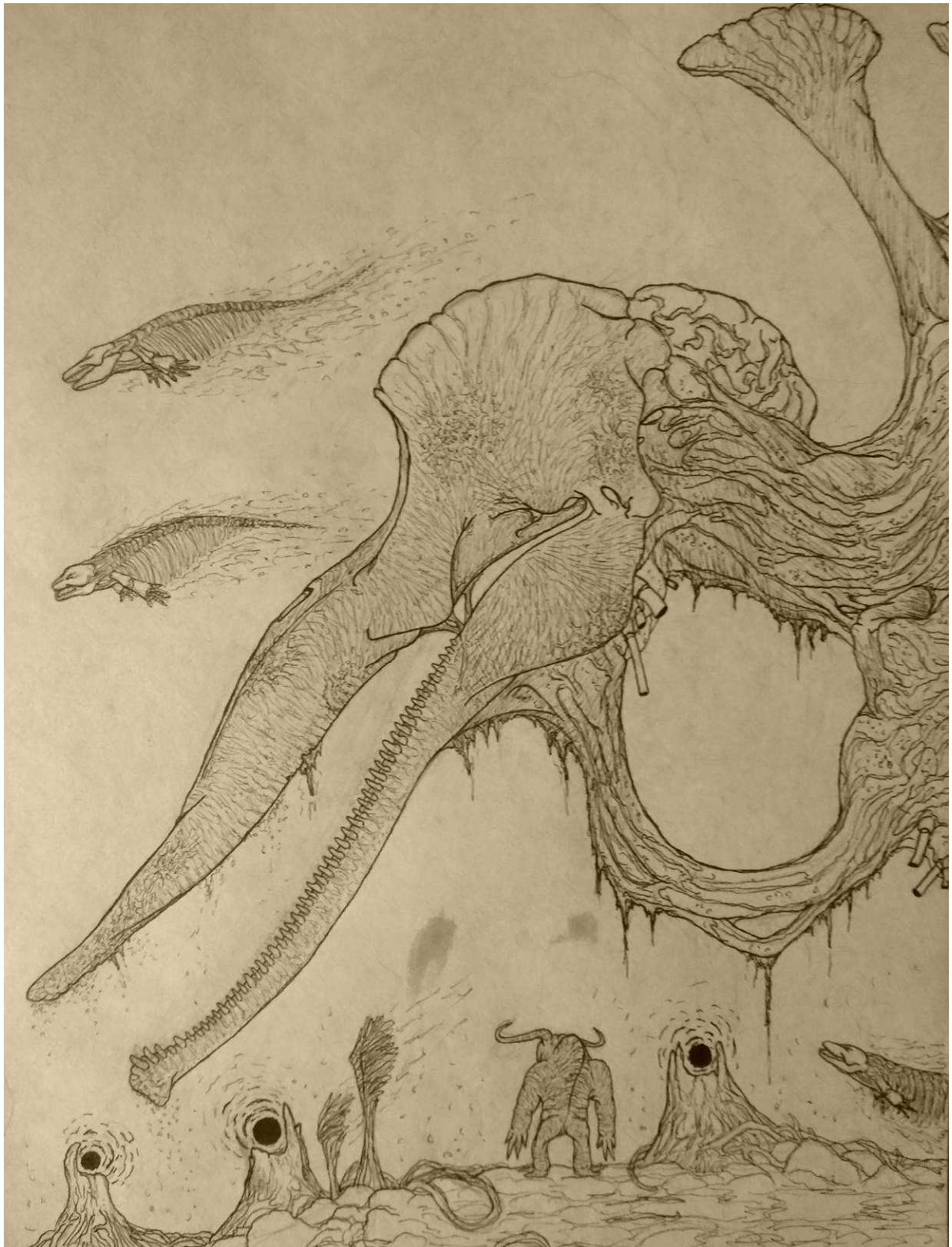
“Wait up, please, I’m not exactly fast”.

“Neither am I”, chuckled Prophet, and Obaddion was struck at how odd it was that a creature without a mouth could speak like him. He supposed the gill slits by the bottom of Prophet’s face sufficed, they moved in accordance to its words.

“Damn, this’ll be good!”, wheezed Obaddon sarcastically, catching up to his newfound companion. “We can stay up late pirating anime and go on riverboat gambling trips”.

“Hah, I was planning on killing one of the Arch-angels”, grunted Prophet.

At that moment there was a great rumbling, and the largest of the Archangels lumbered past the cliff, immense head well above the stony heights, veiny necks dripping with bile. Hands and arms reached out from the massive hearts and stomachs, mouths gaped for air that didn’t exist. They were hit with the familiar blow of hopelessness, bad memories that weren’t their own, and it seemed an eternity until the cruel angel passed by, trailed by Livyatans who fed on its leavings.



Prophet exhaled deeply, scratching its back.

“Well, I’m gonna have to take a big, fat nope on that one”, said Obaddion with a grimace.

“If not us, who else?”, rumbled Prophet, turning to face him. “We can’t let them suffer”.

“Sure we can”, hissed Obaddion. “Just as they let me”.

“An eye for an eye, eh?”.

“Yes”.

“I can see why Leben got to you”.

“Hmm?”.

Prophet gave no answer, turning and walking back the way it came. Obaddion followed in silence. *Angels and demons. Why is it that what is cruel seems so alluring, and that which is good is not enticing in the least?* He could not help but feel that his new companion was of a better sort than Leben, even if it looked like the physical incarnation of sin itself.

#

Words can’t hurt me. I say it but I don’t believe it, a lie like so much else.

Deep down inside I’m pathetic, no matter how many space whales I rip in half. Fat and slow, unable to truly speak, unable to confront myself, unable to forgive.

Do you talk?

Such a simple question, but when it was asked it had been more so a statement, telling me I couldn’t, mocking me for my failures, my lowly nature, mocking me for I am not a person and will never be treated as such, doomed to a cell, to shrieking, to fighting, to being hated and misunderstood. All in the name of entertainment, of escaping reality into fantasies. But those fantasies would never be the same, vegan patties don’t taste the same as the real deal, true flesh. If only I could taste such food, better food than monster meat, bleeding dust and rancid hearts.

I don't know what to do anymore, damn it! What am I? What is this? If it's a dream then why do I bleed, why do I taste?

So trapped, so lost, without purpose or goal. But I can't let them win, I can't give up again, like I did back in the cell. Pathetic monster, unable to fight, unable to talk, beating his brains against the wall like the depressed piece of shit he is! I hate it but I must!

I feel so helpless, so devoid, so scared, with nothing to guide me. My ideals of death... life... Heaven... they broke here. Angels don't have wings, they're walking corpses skulled with whale teeth. Stars speak and sing but the songs are for funerals, trees here aren't green they're bones. The woods. The sea. Sunlight and morning dew, rain on the pines. They were the only things tying me down, keeping me a part of the world, before I learned that I was the villain. That I didn't belong.

Mass-produced fighting meat, thrown away like plastic toys, shit up by an angel to suffer again. God made us to eat and shit what we eat and make more shit-eaters and suffer under the uncaring Sun. Sentient creation is a monstrosity, there isn't anything in existence besides eating and shitting, but there's plenty of beings who were made for want of a higher purpose, a place, a task, endowed with goals and hopes and aspirations that would never be achieved, never realized. I ache for meaning but have none besides that which I realized in the arena, in the faces of people, the screams...

Will the suffering ever end? What is this living for, besides the same "eat and grow" philosophy of the worms? All things die, they say, so should you. All things shit, they say, so should you. If you don't stoop to their lowly nature they deem you weak... sensitive... passing off your internal struggles as pre-teen edginess. So what if it's edgy!? I have a right to be that way, I got disembowled by a fucked-up cross between a frog and a rhinoceros beetle in front of a live audience... and they *cheered* for it!

The cool kids wear sportsy shoes and style their hair to look like a mop. If you don't copy them like a fucking lemming you're destined to be ignored, mocked even. At least if they mock you that means they know you exist, that you're not just part of some hideous dream...

People talk and shit and fuck and expect you to do the same.

I talk, so should you. If you don't you're not my equal, you're to be ignored, hated.

God's taken everything from me: my innocence, my health, my body, my cave and pool and life under the trees. God sent me to the cell, the arena, into the cruel hands of his prime creation, humanity, his masterpiece. I'm not even a proper animal, damn it, I'm a monster! I'm nothing but a toy, a fighting machine, not part of God's creation but a messy imitation made by hairless apes, a fantasy shaped in meat like drawings in the mud.

You took the one place I loved, the one place I belonged, my very place in life, God. What next? My body's gone, my meaning's gone. There's just a soul now. Will you take it too, or leave it to rot, leave it to vultures masquerading as your angels?

All things eat and procreate and grow. It is a law deemed irreversible, as if there is nothing else in life! I want to die, again. There's no body left, only a soul, and when the soul goes there will be nothing! Lovely emptiness, like sleep!

They laugh and revel in their lowly nature, oysters without shells in muck disguised as homes, lives, purpose. But what is there besides to eat and shit and fuck? That which we make for ourselves, that which others make for us? Enjoy things, but what? What I enjoyed is gone!

I have nothing, am nothing!

God hurts you because he loves you, because pain refines. Why were we made to be hurt, to bleed and cry? The weak die to make room for the strong and they're forgotten. Only the showiest pigs get the blue ribbon, the others get sent down a conveyor belt to the grinder, to be some other

pig's shit! Many deem the world a cold, uncaring, godless void, yet it cares enough to separate the fittest from the herd, breed them while the others get made into stew. I've tasted it in life forgotten, never with this mouth yet I yearn for it so. What was I? Could I bear the answer?

Everything stops at one point, every line ends. Why is it criminal to cut yours short, just to be accepted by the rest, to show that you eat and shit and procreate just like them? I tried to prove I was like them but what does it matter!? They'll never accept me, no matter how well I wrote and painted because unless I turn into a human myself I'm nothing to them. If I could stop shitting and fucking like them they would want me dead anyway, because it's unnatural. But I'm already unnatural, made in mockery of nature itself, yet it's the thing I cling closest too.

Stars die, stars shit, but they're stars. Worms come from the dust and eat it, everything is intertwined... sharing some basic similarity. But everything also has the ability to aspire, to want for better... to do more than eat and grow and procreate like worms. God made them that way, just as he made people capable of both kindness and cruelty.

#

"Home at lassst!", rumbled Prophet after perhaps half an hour of walking, ever farther beyond the surface, past winding stones and ebony spires into the shadows, the cool damp, away from the screams and meat-angels.

It had led Obaddion to the opening of a vast (but small to him) cavern with a black, oily lake that stunk mightily on one side and a fair bit of flat rocky ground on the other. Bits of water, at least he hoped it was just water, dripped from the walls. A little pale light glowed in the corner, one of the "stars". This one did not speak or plague his thoughts, it was silent.

"Don't mind it", Prophet mentioned, seeing Obaddion's wary observation of the light. "I robbed it of its power long ago. Now it's just a nice little night-light".

“I always figured they were stars, but... what exactly are those things to begin with?”, asked Obaddion, pawing at the rocky ground with his feet. It was an uncomfortable place.

“Honestly, I’m not sure”, huffed Prophet, scratching its wrinkly neck. Bits of dead skin floated off like ash. “Fallen angels of a sort I suppose, what’s left after Leben eats their bodies. This one here called itself ‘Zeus’ or something, said people worshipped it”.

“Imagine worshipping a nightlight”, grunted Obaddion.

Prophet burst into deep, booming laughter and sat down, leaning against the cave wall.

“Two more questions”, began Obaddion. “Is there anyone else here like you and me, and what do we do now?”. He began walking around the cave, sniffing out the nooks and crannies.

“I’ll answer the second first”, rumbled Prophet. “We wait, rest a bit, then make plans to get out. And sadly, no... we’re special little snowflakes... no one is like us”.

“What do you mean?”.

“You know well enough... those deep memories... a past life... a fusion of souls. Not one or the other. I bear that burden too”.

“Mhm... you said we can get out? Right?”.

“Of course!”, Prophet snorted, puffing out a bit of warm air. “But only a in a certain way...”.

“The Archangels?”.

“You’re quite smart...”.

“Thank you”.

“...and yes, we’ll need to kill an Archangel in ord...”.

“Hold up”.

“Ah, just let me finish”.

“Sorry about that”.

“Mhm... well, hmm...”, muttered Prophet, scratching its head. “How can I best put this? Oh! Basically, the Arch-angels have the ability to

“teleport”, or, more accurately, warp between dimensions and places while still being on their own unholy plane of existence. But this ability isn’t really theirs, because they’re just loosely put-together meat machines made from the carcass of Leviathan. It’s from the souls they possess, the souls that power them: angels. They’re also powered by human souls, human agony turned into the drive to drag others down to their level, hah, misery loves company after all. But it’s the angels’ souls that give them their “teleporting” ability. And because these souls don’t really belong to the Arch-angels, if you bring one down and free the souls, you can consume them and acquire said “teleportation” yourself. Of course, in order to do that you must rip out the Arch-angel’s brain, which is the organ that allows it to utilize these souls. And that is no easy task”.

“So kill one, and we can eat its soul and teleport out of here?”, summarized Obaddion with one eyebrow raised.

“Easier said than done”.

“And they aren’t actually angels?”.

“Well... angels are a hard thing to describe... often something more felt than seen... light in the heavens... psychotropic body fluids... black stars and bleeding moons... I can’t comprehend many of them... and though we see the Archangels as... well... pregnancy-metaphor space monsters... they’re truly something much different”.

“Eh... I guess I’ll just stick with calling them angels”.

“Sounds good”.

“There’s just one small problem with this plan”.

“What’s that”.

“These things are two-thousand-fucking-feet-tall and eat souls”.

“What’s with you and cursing!? You’re smart enough to have a better vocabulary than that... they just make you sound... crude”.

“No offense to you... but fancy speech obscures meaning. It’s like what politicians and college students use to sound smart. The complicated words and run-on sentences make it hard to understand... so no one

realizes how stupid the points they're making are. Oh... also kind of like pseudo-science gargon in movies... 'space titanium' and 'octagonal-diagonalizers'... show me a time-travel plot that isn't a pretentious mess".

"In my defense, being a metaphysical being millions of years old my speech and thought patterns are naturally... different".

"Ah shoot... sorry about that".

"All is well. I know you weren't always this way... it's years of pain that made you bitter".

"How'd you know?".

"Sometimes you just know things". Prophet slumped against the moist stone and began to snore.

"Wait, Prophet...".

"Hmph... yes?".

"How are we going to kill an Archangel".

"God will help us".

"God's nothing but a fucking tyrant".

Prophet didn't respond, but Obaddion knew it was still awake.

#

Words can hurt in ways different than teeth, perhaps more painfully.

Prophet's been quiet. I can't blame it, not after what I said. It was rude of me, but it just came out. Nonetheless, I can't excuse myself.

It didn't deserve that... it's nice. At least I think it is... maybe a bit... senile... a bit naïve... but not evil. If anything, it gives off a grandparent sort of vibe.

If I hadn't lived this life, I would perhaps have more faith in God, more reverence. But I after years of nothing but torture and abandonment... I just can't. After all, I'm not his creation... I'm the hideous product of fantasies made flesh, a television monster dragged out into reality.

I have seen God, in the nature of his creation. Is man not made alike to God, in his image? Therefore humanity provides a good reference point,

insight as to God's nature, just as looking at an animal's teeth gives insight as to what it eats. Blunt molars for grinding plants, sharp canines for ripping flesh. I have both and thus can appreciate all kinds of foods.

Anyways, God is alike to man and vice versa, at least the way I see it. Just like man, God has brought creation into unwilling pain, unwilling sentience, cruel existence. As to why I can only guess, though his intent was probably not entirely malevolent. Perhaps he wanted something capable of appreciating the things he made: good food, the Sun, the cool of summer swims and spring rain. In that respect he did very well, those things are all quite enjoyable.

The only problem is, he also made painful things to be experienced. Look at those parasitic worms that burrow in your brain, flies that breed under your skin, hyenas and wild dogs eating their prey alive. God made them.

Can you know of those things and still think God is entirely good?

I saw something about an event called the Holocaust on the television. People killed people like factories process cattle, piling up emaciated corpses in ditches with bulldozers. I don't care much for people, but it was horrible, and God let it happen all the same.

Suffering refines, they say, and it's true, but there's a difference between going on a tough hike and getting your brain eaten by worms. We have free will, choices over our lives, it's not all up to God. But God has the power to stop these things nonetheless, to give us better than Holocausts and brain-eating worms. Why doesn't he?

Maybe God's so beyond mortal existence that our suffering is trivial to him, merely a blink of an eye to him in his infinite age and wisdom.

Or maybe God simply doesn't care, ignores the screams, ignores the blood, because people worship him anyway. He leaves us to bleed and die and work the land on some lonely little water-covered rock, and people praise him for it. He birthed us into pain, and people speak of his goodness. Damn, if my time in the cell's taught me anything, it's that

blindly trusting those in charge will send an electric prod in your face. Honor your parents, that's true, but sometimes parents are unjust, cruel, unfair to their children. Sometimes they abuse them. They shouldn't, having brought the child into life, they should make it a good one, but they hurt them nonetheless. Potters make jars for all sorts of purposes, ideally good ones, but sometimes they're just shit-storing chamber pots.

When people disobey God they are punished, doomed to the inferno for not adhering to a rather aged bunch of rules, for failing to resist what is essentially their natural behavior, their human nature... something God gave them in the first place! But when God hurts them, when God sends suffering their way they are expected to take it and worship him as if he is doing good for them!

Not me. I disobeyed my keepers, my creators, my gods. They tortured me, punishing me for doing what I was made to do, for being a monster, just as God punishes them for following their own human nature. I don't regret it, they tasted better than the kibble.

Such is the corruption of power. Those below you progressively decline in value, their problems become but footnotes to your grand vision. All-loving father my ass, that's no better than the propaganda used by certain dictators, portraying them as benevolent leaders who "care" for the people.

Of course, one can just say there is no God. Perhaps they anchor themselves in science, or perhaps they follow the hallucinogenic hippy-shit belief that it's all the universe's doing, as if the universe is self-aware and not just a great big cosmic shit for a bunch of overcomplicated maggots. Damn, people are stupid, yet I was the one kept behind the glass.

Science works, for the most part.

It explains things well enough, but one must remember that ages ago, the science was that the Earth was flat, that dinosaur fossils belonged to biblical giants (they thought a fragment of *Megalosaurus* femur was a fossilized scrotum). Science is always changing, what is considered truth

now may be mocked for its foolishness later. Not to say that the Earth is only two-thousand years old or that evolution isn't a thing.

Evolution! My, my...

I was never subject to it, never the product of it. Animals are, they're perfected for their niche, their little place in life. But I was made in a monster factory, tissue grown in a lab, shaped to look like I do and duplicated as necessary. I'm not perfected, I'm a monster, without role in nature, without God. Free perhaps, but purposeless. An abomination, made to cause suffering and nothing more. I hate myself for it.

Evolution works nonetheless. Some ask, though it's more so a challenge than genuine curiosity, because people rarely consider opposing points: "How can humans have come from apes, if apes are still around?". A stupid question. The apes people came from are long gone, the apes today are just relatives. That's like asking: "If the egg came from the chicken, why is the chicken still there?". You can find fossils showing how theropod dinosaurs gradually became more and more like birds, heck, they *were* birds. It's a thing, like it or not.

The theory of evolution can explain how living things became like they are now. Science, though sometimes best taken with a grain of salt, can explain those kinds of things, weather, the continents, why people are cruel and the sun is warm. But when you get to the very root of existence itself, why there is something and not nothing, well, there's no good answer. Try and explain it. I bet some have, rambling on with acid-trip quantum nonsense that basically equates to one of two things "no idea" or "random equation/theory that doesn't really answer anything". You have fossils to prove evolution, scars to prove you were hurt. But existence itself? That's something you can't explain.

There are things beyond comprehension, old things, abstract things. The mind-realm I walk in now is proof of it: I hear the voices of fallen stars, see ground that bleeds and stones that sail, and I'm walking

alongside a... thing... that looks alike to a demon in pursuit of a metaphysical soul-eater powered by human suffering.

Some things you just can't explain. Why not believe there is a God, a creator, of some sort? A painter needs a painter after all.

There seems to be a firm divide in the human mind between science and religion. Everyone thinks that they aren't interchangeable, that one doesn't allow for the other. But both derive from the same basic source: a desire to understand the world. Sadly, both are ultimately lacking in answers, serving more as guides than anything.

Is it wrong to believe that men came from apes and God had a hand in it? Is it foolish and unscientific to wonder at the sheer impossibility of existence? Jesus always taught with stories, using seeds to represent children of God... a harvest to represent divine workings. The Bible is one-third a history book, one-third a moral compass, and one-third symbolic... metaphorical... just as the ten-horned beast and seven-headed dragon are likely symbolic entities so may be the Ark... the story of Creation itself... not pure truths but merely simplified representations... puzzles to be solved.

People are stubborn and shut off their minds, grounding themselves in the soil they grew in. Contemplate the world with open minds, take both sides into account and decide for yourself. Because we really won't know for sure... not until we die.

I believe there is a God, just as when you see an egg you know something must have laid it. However, I don't argue in favor of his works, or agree with his doings.

Yes, I appreciate his work in the Sun, the taste of good food, the breeze on my sail as I tramp through the woods. But it was God who took that from me, and it was God who made my tormentors. God could have given me better, borne me away from suffering. Yet he didn't.

I believe in God, terrible, omnipotent God. And I hate him.

“Arise, it’s time we begin preparations”, rumbled Prophet, shaking Obaddion’s shoulder gently to wake him up.

Obaddion groaned, rolling on his side and struggling to resist the bliss of sleep.

“For... what?”.

“Killing an Arch-angel, of course”, chuckled Prophet. “It’ll be fun. Educational, even”.

“I just want to get out of here and taste real food”.

“You can dine upon any number of the eldritch abominations found here. Even if they are ill-suited for your... refined palate”.

“I will eat nothing but the finest of fish and carrion”, said Obaddion in a mockingly-elegant voice. “Twigs and leaves suffice in a pinch”.

“Don’t get too comfortable. Soon we will begin a nice little journey to the heart of this wretched place. There’s a power there, it’ll protect our souls from the Archangels’ greedy maws. Unfortunately, we must make the worse half of the journey blind”.

“A blind passage?”, grunted Obaddion, lifting his head up with sudden interest.

“Yes. Or oui, if tu préfère Français”.

“Leben’s presence is strongest there. It’ll try and tempt you, lure you to fall over the edge, into the sands that aren’t sands. We can resist the worst of the temptation by covering our eyes”.

“Eyes... where are yours?”, muttered Obaddion, still unwilling to get up off the cool stony ground.

“I for one don’t need eyes to see. I have sonar. Therefore I shall guide you”.

“Snazzy”.

At that moment the ground began to rumble, and the two monsters felt a twinge of despair. In due time the tremors subsided, but it seemed an eternity until they passed.

“Leben’s growing stronger”, observed Prophet. “Even so, it fights like a cornered animal. Soon enough it’ll be smited and sent into the Bottomless Pit, as deserved. Then we will ascend to paradise, to be with God”.

“Your God will do this *when?*”, hissed Obaddion, pulling his lips into a wolfish snarl.

“Whenever He feels like it. By the way... well... why do you hate Him?”.

“Because of what he’s done to me, and what he hasn’t”.

“Hmm... usually... those who hate God simply deny His existence”.

“Well... I need someone to blame... don’t I?”. Obaddion managed a weak grin, showing white teeth.

“You can’t blame everything on God”. Prophet scratched its wrinkled frill.

“Why do you *like* God?”.

“Because... because it keeps me in check. Morals... however painful... the servitude keeps me from going back to the way I used to be”.

“So you follow him out of fear?”. Obaddion cocked his head at the horned titan.

“Partially”.

“For all that talk of the beauty of free will... choice... sure we are given it, but we are never really free. We can never really do what we want... only what God wants us to do. He uses the threat of Hell like a robber uses their gun... sure, you can choose to not give him your money, but who wants to be shot?”.

“Every game needs a few rules. Besides, consequences are necessary to understand your reality”. There was a creaking sound as Prophet stretched its back.

“Only tyrants are followed out of fear. Living in a world of his creation taught me that”.

“Didn’t it teach you... other things... of light... love... beauty?”.

“It taught me those are things I can never have... because God chose for me to be a monster”.

#

“We’re drawing close”, rumbled Prophet, scratching its chin as it surveyed the landscape ahead. They had been wandering through the labryinths of elder stone and moss lit not by suns for quite awhile. The trees weren’t right there, the sky was just as alive as the bleeding soil. Obaddion hated it, but at least he had more space than he did in the cell.

“When we get there, do we just close our eyes?”, he asked, scraping a clump of rancid moss from his foot.

“You could, but I wouldn’t trust it”, rumbled Prophet.

“We’ll need blindfolds then”, observed Obaddion. He stopped, sitting down to rest. Even in dream his massive spine and ailing back were painful burdens.

“Of course”.

“I have a suspicion it’ll be strips of space whale meat”.

“Goodness no!”, grunted Prophet, digging something up from the trampled ground. “Here, I’ve found some bits of shed Arch-angel skin, well, not really skin as they have none, but dead tissue that suffices nonetheless”. It handed Obaddion a long strip of grey, rubbery material, thin like a tattered garment but strong and flexible.

“Even their dead bits make me feel miserable”.

“Thankfully we don’t have to put them on just yet”, wheezed Prophet, slinging its own blindfold over its shoulder like an old towel. “Not until we near the beginning of a very deep ravine, one that leads down into the very heart of this world. It’s a bitter place, for at least up here the ground’s green... the stones browns and greys. Fair semblance to our own worlds, I suppose. But down there the rock becomes meat and... worse, the stuff Leben uses to make its creations. There’s a narrow (for creatures our size) path along the sides we can take, but I must warn you

both that Leben will know we are there and do everything it can to tempt us... to lead us off the edge and make us its own. Whatever you do, don't take off your blindfold. There are some things there that shouldn't be seen".

"I'm not going to bother asking what".

"A good descision".

At times the mind-realm was a garden, a lovely, abstract garden.

All stones, many an earthy brown, some natural, others carved roughly into spirals and tunnels, weaving like coral, forming halls carpeted in moss and passageways lit by speaking stars. The stars, they were everywhere, and at times they would disappear and then reappear somewhere else. Always speaking, always calling. They spoke of their power, power they could give to those who joined them, singing of paradises unrealized. Though Obaddion knew very well that they were not to be trusted, they possessed a lure of sorts, and he could not help but be drawn to them.

"Careful", rumbled Prophet, seeming to have read his thoughts, as they passed through a lengthy passageway of rusted stone made golden in the light of many residing stars. "They can't touch you unless you allow them to do so".

"And you have to be at least eighteen", snickered Obaddion.

Prophet groaned and brushed aside a drifting, gelatinous body of cells, many to form one great big cell with organelles as big as people. They were common there, hovering in the skies, some the size of small continents, and at times they would descend to absorb and liquify the sands below. Occasionally Obaddion thought he could see the outlines of human faces in them as they passed, but only briefly, like glimpses of ghosts in a nighttime hall.

Leben's garden was oddly beautiful in places, paled trees of twirling vines and blossoming flowers, growing up from stones below and dangling from the distant mountains floating above. Some were tall and

stately, branches bunched together with a skin-like substance and heavy slime. Others were more like shrubs with ashen vines for branches, and still there was the occasional great red tree, like solitary, stately oaks seen so often in cliché nostalgia but red, scarlet bone and leaves of bleeding hide. At times their canopies glowed with blazing firelight, fallen timbers, a burning rose. Stone tables adorned the outer courtyards, complete with rock-chairs and bowls of meat, fresh meat, bleeding meat, human corpses.

Any number of Leben's subjects gathered in the gardens, fleshy fellows almost like people but without faces, legs and stomachs but without arms, meat tubes that spoke in music and worshipped the speaking stars. It reminded Obaddion of his recurring dream, of the boat people. Abstract beaches, no eyes.

It was all like a painting, colors and shapes flowing in places, pure artistry without need for conventional form. There was music, music in the voices of fallen angels, protein trees, embryonic matrix in the sky. Odd horns and trumpets, slow drumbeats and sorrowful violins. It was a veritable theme, played by an orchestra unseen, ringing all around, as hideous as it was lovely. Somber in tone, music but not, it fit the mind-realm well.

"Do you hear the music?", he asked softly as they passed through one of the hallow courtyards. Prophet nodded solemnly, not even bothering to acknowledge the many distorted forms lingering against the walls, eating their brethren atop the tables.

"Scenic, isn't it?", chuffed Prophet.

They watched as one of the skeletal orcas dove down and snatched a not-person, crushing the silent victim in its cruel jaws.

"Good riddance", muttered Prophet, watching quietly as pale worms erupted from the ground and began to drink the blood.

Obaddion looked to the outer depths and began to speak softly to himself:

Scarlet sky and rancid heath.

*Sate the glut of angel's teeth.
Trees here grow not the same.
For my agony cruel sentience is to blame.*

*Tables of tempered stone. Bowls of meat and broken bone.
Afternoon gathering aside the stars, guests like men but so afar.
Cruel sentience, do they bear it too?
Suffering external, enter subdermal. True pain is in thought and
mind.*

*Cruel sentience, mark upon man by God.
Creator and creation alike, they made me bear it in kind.
Safely beneath epidermal rind.*

*What are my thoughts but realities of my own?
What am I to others but meat and bone?
Do I exist in any but dream?
Birthed from none save deathly womb upon bloody stream?
Open the curtains lest they weep.
Memories of the sun are for me to keep.
I will not rest until I see it again.
Cruel sentience wills it so.*

Prophet turned and cocked his head at him quizically, and Obaddion realized with a jolt that he had been speaking out loud.

“It’s not a phase, mom!”, he whined, enhancing it with an exaggerated groan. *Damn, you let it slip out. Stupid, fat, stupid, and edgy too. What will it think of you now?*

“All is well...”, rumbled Prophet. “Your nature... minus the bloodthirsty aspect... is not something to be ashamed of. Don’t let fear of judgement subdue who you are”.

In due time the gardens and courtyards came to an end, and they entered a place of oily stones that smelled like meat. There were worms everywhere, carpeting the ground with their writhing, intestine-esque forms, some of which were several dozen meters long. Obaddion muttered angrily to himself as they walked, annoyed with the sensation of such creatures at his feet.

Gone was green mold and the light of fallen angels. The lower depths were red and thick with a smoky sort of air, reeking of blood, fading into scarlet and monstrous outcroppings of stone. The ceiling, when visible, was scattered with dripping, phallic things the color of dead skin.

“Is this Hell?”. Obaddion drew a line in the grimy dust coating a pillar.

“Hell is much worse”, replied Prophet.

It came to a stop as they wound around a corner and came to behold a vast passageway, dark, slick stone forming a crude hall that led to distant light, golden light, shining through a great crack in the dream. Everything stunk with an air of menace and horror greater than anything else, but was equally luring, tempting, beckoning with the gentle amber glow.

“I suppose it’s time we adorn ourselves with these lovely blindfolds”, rumbled Prophet, coughing uncomfortably as it wrapped the tissue around its singular eye.

“So that hole on your face is an eye after all”, remarked Obaddion, struggling to put his own blindfold on. “Sorry if that came across as rude, I’m not good with... talking”.

“No worries! And luckily, yes, it is essentially an eye... well, actually just a mess of photoreceptors, but... well... same difference. It’s so nice to be able to see. I’ve known those who can’t, and, though the darkness is blissful, perhaps it’s better to open your eyes and face the light”.

It scratched its back and began making a series of low, deep clicks, surveying their path with what was evidently sonar. Obaddion remembered hearing noises like that in a whale documentary they played

on the television. A wonderful tragedy presented itself in that he knew, for example, that a blue whale's penis could grow up to nearly sixteen feet in length, but he never once learned the language of his creators or the true workings of humanity's steel-and-concrete world.

"So...", began Obaddion, tying his blindfold securely. "I guess we go in... there". *If only we didn't have to, there's something off about that light... This shithole makes the arena seem like a playground. At least there I had a body.*

"Of course", muttered Prophet. "In the very womb of death".

"Edgy queen...", began Obaddion in a musical tone.

"You're one to talk! Besides, it's a fitting description. This is where Leben formed the Arch-angels. This is where they take their soul-eating power from, and, if we succeed, we can acquire it ourselves".

"And eat delicious souls".

"Who wouldn't want to?"

"I for one prefer actual food".

"I second that motion. But still... we'll have decent food soon enough, if all goes accordingly. It'll be hard... but for your sake I'm asking you not to give in. Shake on it?"

Prophet held out a wrinkly, clawed hand. Obaddion took it with his own and shook.

"Alright... it's time". Prophet exhaled deeply and began to walk towards the light, cruel light, in all its enticing glory. "Stay close, follow my voice, keep a hand on my back if you have to. And whatever you do, no matter what it sounds like... if you hear a voice, don't listen".

They drew closer to the light, moving single-file. How comical they looked! Prophet was searching the space in front of it with outstretched arms, clicking frequently as it walked, with Obaddion following behind, hands against Prophet's wrinkly back so as to avoid being lost.

Time and movement slowed as they neared the light, their steps becoming weak and laborious, like in a bad dream where you can't run

away. There was warmth in the light, and it drew them closer, away from the outer air that had begun to seem so cold.

Obaddion was struck with an odd memory, one without words, simply that of warmth, and darkness, infantile youth, closest to that which formed him. Not a factory, not God. This was different, old, so much older and so distant from him but a part of him all the same...

Mother?

He began to tremble and passed into the light.

#

Always alone, always a monster, even before, even in those distant memories.

He had only ever really been happy in nature, in that pond he liked to visit, looking for frogs, playing on the rocks by the beach, climbing trees. To roll a log over and find a salamander made his day, the rising Sun upon an autumn morning was far more beautiful in his eyes than garish clothes and plastic things.

#

“I can take you back there, if you so choose”.

Leben. Dirty, damned Leben. What are you? And what makes you think I’ll fall for your shit again? I was angry last time, and scared, an easy target, but not this time! Not this time!

“Don’t you want to be rid of your pain? Each step hurts, even in rest you ache. I can take it all away, I can make you comfortable, if only you give yourself to me. I kept my word last time. I gave you revenge. Humanity is here with me, their souls at least. You could be alone by the beach in perfect peace”.

I shat blood and made weird steam. Never again.

“Is there anything better? Will God help you? Will your creators help you? You are alone, alone in dream, and the miserable creature you walk with will never understand you, never truly care for you. Only I can, and

only I can give you the power you want, sate your thirst for suffering in kind”.

No one will never understand me. I admit that. But can they look into my mind? At least Prophet’s decent enough to talk to me like I’m anything but a dumb animal.

The Obaddion they see, the Obaddion in their minds, it’s different from the Obaddion I see in myself. My thoughts are mine, my reasoning mine. The reality of myself is unto me, their perception of me is different from my own.

But what exactly do they think?

#

Prophet had never been in the heart of the mind-realm before. It couldn’t bear the journey alone, left with nothing but temptation, the sweet voice of death. But perhaps an ally wasn’t any better, for save the hands on its back he might as well have not existed. Both were silent, working through thoughts, hoping not to fall.

One thing was for certain, the place was *alive*.

Stony ground, stony walls. In texture and visual appearance (as far as it knew), the ravine was inorganic matter. But it could hear a heartbeat, the pumping of blood, the pulsing of vast organs without physical forms. The air was thick and warm, lit with amber-gold light unseen by its eyes.

The sounds of a living thing captured the air, bringing visuals of mother’s womb. In its old age Prophet had nearly forgotten, nearly forgotten being left alone to die, torn from its embryonic refuge and left to kick in its own blood.

No one wanted it. Even other monsters, Obaddion had clearly been disturbed by its appearance when they first met.

No one wants a hideous, horned creature in demon’s clothing. Kill it with fire, stab it with spears. There was nowhere Prophet really belonged, alone in itself, alone in a vast universe. Some places proved agreeable, but

even the kinder creatures always shyed away. Not one was like it, shaped in the same way, cursed with the same unholy birth.

Could it blame Obaddion for cursing God? Of course not! Who was Prophet, slaughterer of so many in ages past, to judge? Besides, they were both alone, alone as things made to be hated and destroyed, never to be loved or cared for but endowed with the want for such things all the same. Monsters proved to be the most tragic of beings, set apart by their strength and size, but those things by which they were defined could never truly save them, never give them anything but a life of fighting, a life of pain. What good was such great power if it paled in the face of the weaponry of sapient beings, the hellfire of those who sought to destroy them?

“You were very powerful once, powerful enough to overcome such things”, trilled a voice, a beautiful, powerful voice that flowed like liquid gold, speaking with sheer elegance. “Why do you serve He who took it away? Why do you follow He who left you here alone, who made you what you are? What has He done for you?”.

What have you done for me?

“The question is, what *can* I do for you?”, asked the voice, so polite, so tempting. “You’ve relegated yourself to solitude for so long, forced to accept such bitter circumstances, such a fall from grace. We’ve had our differences, yes, but wouldn’t you want to settle the score with the God who abandoned you? I can give you back yourself, your past form, if you pledge yourself to me. Don’t you wish to fly again? Your wings were beautiful, your halo was golden fire shaped into a crown upon your head, a crown fit for such as you, and it was all taken away”.

I seem to remember you eating me alive, twice.

“Third time’s the charm, you’ll see. But I can spare you that cruel fate if you make yourself my ally. Get your friend in on the deal while you can, he’s so weak, so afraid. Why take the side that hates you, the side that sees you as monsters? I am more alike to you than them, you see. It could be a lovely partnership, friendship perhaps...”.

#

They always hated you, always. Always mocking, or simply ignoring.

“I can give you all the things you never knew you wanted. Dine in the finest halls, upon foods far more delectable than the flesh you’ve known. You can drink the nectar of gods, of Archangels, fruit and honey from Eden, if you so choose. I can give you power, great, terrible power, enough to destroy anything and everything you despise. You’re a monster after all, made to hate but confined in a weak body with no means to put an end to that which torments you. Don’t you enjoy the screams?”.
Leben’s voice flowed like a smooth river, gentle as it lapped against the edges of his mind.

Alone in yourself, your thoughts.

Body of beast and mind of man, what exactly are you, Obaddion?

What is this? What drives you past sleep, up from the ground and through the hallow gardens, amidst angels of rotting meat and bitter stars? You say you despise yourself and your life, but you work so hard to preserve them. Why exactly did you take Leben’s offer, back in the cell. Why did you keep walking, forcing yourself through that wretched city? Why now do you choose to try and fight rather than sleep?

Emerald marshes under summer drapery, algae like pleasant meadows amidst rotting stumps made mountains, reeds like forests. You soaked in them in years past, eating fish, basking on the shores. In older memories you saw them too, but where? Who were you?

“You tell yourself you hate people. Such a broad generalization. Do you hate *all* of them, or merely the things they’ve done to you? I seem to remember you berating me for my work. Babies don’t deserve this, children don’t, at least in your eyes, eyes that are so human...”.

Always accusing, always provoking. Never will you let me rest, Leben. Perhaps your and my minds are alike in that respect, always hating, never giving me a break. Damn, I sound pretentious!

“Are you simply afraid of them, frustrated with them? Is this hate actually envy, your pitiful mind so awfully jealous of what they have, things you were made wanting but never given, never now, but in past life, with just enough of a memory to make you yearn for them again? Who were you on the beach? Was the mouth that tasted good things the one you eat with now? Who were those that walked aside you, those you knew?”.

So many questions, and no answers. All this mind's done is made me confused. And helped me make up edgy poetry. But still no answers...

“Are there really no answers, or are you simply too afraid to admit you know them?”.

Sentience is so very rare, sapience even rarer. This mind must have come from somewhere, as did this body. But every bit as cloned, as disposable, made in a factory like plastic trash.

“What exactly are those memories?”.

What exactly are you?

“Whatever you want me to be. The Leben in your mind is different than the Leben I see in myself. To me I am one thing, to you another. Angel, demon, devil, god, they're all so flimsy and interchangeable. Everyone needs their labels, but labels are merely words we associate with something, an object, an action, an individual. But the only truth is that individual as they exist unto themselves, not how you or I see them, nor how they see themselves. But as far as *physical* forms go, I can become whatever you want. I could present myself as *this...*”.

In Obaddion's mind flashed the burning rose, morphing into cruel skull and battered frame, six wings like those of eagles, those of butterflies, beating and hovering, flesh and light combined in stars made meat. Halo crowned upon the head, first one, then seven. What he had seen the first time he kissed death, only far more intense, and seen only by him in his thoughts. Terrible, burning angel of death! Of light! Revolting but powerful, such cruel beauty! In an instant it came, and equally fast it was gone.

“Or perhaps something more... appealing”. Leben’s voice was so grand, so silky smooth, as golden as its vast pinions, and even its cruel words had beauty, artistry in the grotesque skull. “I see your desires, spurred by flesh. I master them after all, taking after God who made them. But I use them for my own purposes. I could make myself into something beautiful for you, something pleasurable. We could become one. It would be blissful”.

Dear God no...

“You stupid lizard! Do you think I don’t see what goes on in here, in your lovely mind? I am of and for your thoughts, your lower nature! When you were alone in your cell, with the television, I *saw*. When they played certain shows I knew you were looking, turning those ugly eyes to sneak a look like the dirty beast you are! I know you desire *them*, I know the sick things you’ve done. You’re a cannibal, a murderer, and you ask yourself why you feel guilt over them, as if you didn’t already know! Denying it, hiding it! You criticize me for what I’ve done with them, but look at you! Was it all just my Archangels? All they did was take the souls to me, souls! But it was you who killed their bodies, with your steam, with your flies. You killed yourself, and when that didn’t work you killed the very creatures closest to you! Why not dive down to the other side, and become one with them while you’re at it!”.

Go to Hell!

“Oh, I will... and I’ll take you there with me!”.

#

Deeper, ever deeper. Everything swirled and shook, even if he couldn’t see it, he could feel it. Rock or tissue, ravine or intestine? Womb of death, cradle in the epidermal stars.

Obaddion could talk now, what fun! It should had been a triumph, finally becoming equal to man in both mind and voice. Finally he could taste words on his tongue and spew them into the air like steam. But he

was always scared to talk, always nervous. What if he said something wrong? Something stupid?

There was an innate fear of it, of being judged, and that was undoubtedly part of what drove him to hate humans. He knew they fancied him hideous, a beast, a monstrosity. He knew that they thought him to be dumb, inferior to them. He heard the cheers when opponents tasted his blood, when Plane Panther knocked one of his teeth out. They hated him, so he hated back, despising them for rejecting him, rejecting him with not a thought as to his true nature. But where had he acquired it? In the arena it was already there, familiar, like the words in his head.

A past life, prior existence. How old was his mind? What was he? Who?

The ravine that was a stomach that was a womb rumbled again, and he felt warmth, alluring warmth, drawing him to the depths, off the side into meat and ooze, into Leben. The voice knew him, his thoughts, his urges, nothing was safe from the burning rose. If only Prophet knew, it would be appalled. Dirty, disgusting Obaddion, doing it in the dark...

#

The Jews didn't mind the stars at first. They didn't bother fleeing.

Everyone thought the Germans would be defeated, that the rumors weren't true. How could they systematically kill so many people, nearly wipe out an entire race?

But history taught him that was a rare exception, that something so horrible would never happen again. Nothing like that would ever happen to him. He would live a life of mediocrity, finishing schooling, work and spent his free time napping on the couch. First one stupid demand and then another, even if they didn't like it they followed because that was what they were told to do.

If I could be anything, I'd be the stuff I draw.
Monsters.

They told him that they needed him. It was an order. He complied, seeing no hope in resisting. Do as he was told, avoid trouble. They had drilled that mindset into him since he was little, since he started school, and it had soon progressed to the point where he was afraid to break the rules, afraid to step out of line. Worrying over things that didn't matter, resisting who he was. Escaping everything with fantasy worlds, worlds with monsters, worlds on paper, on television. He couldn't change his own reality so he looked into others, yearning for something that didn't exist. But it did.

He didn't realize what was happening until he looked the monster in the eye, a dead, lifeless body, but staring at him with those ugly googly eyes. The teeth, so bestial, yet so human. It faced him, like chimps and cats, an intelligent predator. Like him in some ways: slow, ugly, a brute. When he was little he was always pretending to be a dinosaur...

I drew you.

Then they became one.

#

In time walking tired them, and they slept. Prophet did not.

The air smelled of mother, of paradise, honey and cinammon, things it never knew but desired all the same. What power was in the amber, the lifeblood of Leben, that which fueled the Archangels? In the very deepest recess there was the bleeding heart, the hidden sun, and there Prophet would feed. Leben couldn't stop them physically, it tempted with their thoughts, a far greater battle.

Just a little taste...

Prophet struck the walls with a clawed hand, talons piercing the stone that was meat, releasing a sappy substance like amber. Liquid, its favorite food. What would it be like to have teeth, to have proper jaws instead of a proboscis? Obaddion had joked that it had a penis for a mouth, but Prophet had no genitalia, neither male nor female. It wasn't designed to be procreated, not a part of natural creation. A hybrid, like a mule.

“You belong nowhere but here. Now, feed! Jump off, the milk’s best down there. I’ll give you angel’s wings to fly back up, strength to make the climb. Strength! Stronger than the Archangels! All you must do is join me”.

No!

Prophet pulled its arm away from the wall, from the sap. Forbidden fruit, spoiled milk. It had to resist. It had to be strong, for Obaddion, for its mission. Doubtful voices told it that God had abandoned it, that God hated it. But God was, in small ways, like the father Prophet had never met. God had punished it for its atrocities, but God had also provided for it. In all its struggles, no matter how horrible, it had always made it. Giant robots and primal gods, fallen angels with bitter teeth. They left scars on Prophet’s hide but never finished it off. It always won, or escaped. God had always been with it, teaching it. The hard centuries had shaped Prophet and made it humble, made it understanding, and even without its former power it was still strong. God left it in Leben’s mind realm to prepare a path for Obaddion. Why else would it have been put there, if not to guide him, to help him escape and bring an end to the Archangels?

David had Goliath, Prophet had the seven.

Seven skulls of Leviathan, perched upon the carrion of Behemoth.

Two-thousand feet tall, three-thousand, four-thousand... Who knew for sure?

Angels of death, of decay... Archangels!

Splitting planets with a single scream, consuming even the strongest of souls with a deathly yawn, with the maw of the grave. All of human suffering made into feminine architects of Revelations, beasts beyond logic, beyond comprehension.

David had it easy.

#

“Still sleeping?”, rumbled Prophet, nudging him with a wrinkled foot. “Get up you lazybones!”.

“This place gave me weird dreams”, muttered Obaddion’s grouchy voice. He groaned and forced himself to his feet, using the stony wall to help himself up.

“How much further?”.

“Depends on how fast we move. I’d suppose it’ll take a few hours more to get to the heart of this all, then about twice that to get back”. Prophet scratched its chin as it spoke, creaking like a set of old stairs grown to immeasurable size.

“Shit...”, grumbled Obaddion, leaning against the wall. “I hate wearing this blindfold”.

“Don’t we all?”, groaned Prophet. He could hear as it began to move, finding its way along the path. “Well, let’s get a move on!”.

So he did, trailing Prophet’s shambling form with clumsy steps and outstretched arms. The voice was constant, not always actual speech but memories, bad memories, tempting memories. Visions of things they wanted but couldn’t acquire, things that waited in the darkness below. Blissful darkness, but at such cost!

As they went deeper they could feel the ground shifting, nerve signals and cell growth, pulsing as blood flowed where blood should not. There was a slow, steady rumble in the air, in them, the beating of a vast heart, the workings of a unsatisfied stomach.

Leben.

#

“We could become one”, trilled the voice. “You’d enjoy it. It’s quite nice down there, you could finally rest, sleep like you did as an infant”.

When was I an infant? When was I anything but this? Obaddion, the villian, the arena monster, the city-stomper.

“You know the answer”.

#

Obaddion was absolutely famished.

Always thinking about food. It had been days since he had last eaten, tasted his own flesh in the rubble of man's abomination. What a delicacy in his starved state. Giant size seemed nice and all, but such a massive body commanded a near-constant food supply. Nearly as soon as he had finished growing, his body had begun to digest parts of itself just to stay alive. Before the end he had been walking with a limp, barely able to keep his eyes open, burning lungs and scarred throat. At least his parasites had fed well.

There hadn't been much to do in the cell besides sit and wait to be fed. In the woods he was often hungry, but there was a variety of things to eat. As a last resort he could eat twigs and pinecones, they were better than the kibble he got in his cell.

Why he was hungry now he wasn't sure. He didn't have a proper body, he lived as a dream after all. But what kind of dream was it? It seemed so real, so tangible at times. He felt pain, he felt things, he knew when the odd things occurred that they shouldn't. The Archangels formed bodies in their womb-stomachs after all. Perhaps he was still a physical being, just on a different plane of existence.

Holy crap, I want a baguette.

Bread and butter. Milk. He used to guzzle a gallon a day, but when?

Cheese! Melted on potatoes, on chicken, chicken wrapped in delicious flour shells. Cheese melted with odd meats on a baked circle of dough, pizza! He had tasted it warm and fresh in the city and once again in the warehouse, a cold, leftover bit that far exceeded the foods his teeth knew before. Chicken fried in breading, chicken cooked in stew with all sorts of lovely vegetables. Stew and bread on a rainy afternoon with the window open, a nap in bed after a long walk.

The very best things of life. He knew them, as he knew trees and rocks and pain, but it seemed as if he had never experienced them. But people did, people got the best of everything while their creation languished in a cold cell. Was it really so bad that they suffered now?

Chapter Sixteen

Burning Rose

I'm weak, so terribly weak. Not just because of my hunger, because I'm surrounded by food that is not, food that I wish to eat but can't. The amber sap runs down the walls like honey here, smells of it too, and cinnamon. Just a small taste...

There's no rest for the weak, and everyone seems to find it funny.
"Just a small taste..."

No, damn it!

Who knows what's beyond the sanctuary of this blindfold?

I want to vent, and not steam from my pores. But I can't.

Animals hide their injuries and illnesses as best they can. That's survival, the weak are the first to go. Predators always target the injured, the sick, the young, the frail. There's one now, nipping at the weakest part of me: my mind. Biting at my hatred, my fear, my insecurity.

I was made to be a horrifying, savage brute. Fight and die, as a monster should. I screamed but I always kept fighting, forcing myself not to try and run away because I couldn't. It doesn't matter if it's not real, if it's not physical, if you can't see it. They never cared for the screams because I wasn't like them, I didn't scream the way they did, I didn't express my agony with a likable face, a sympathetic one.

The boat people had no faces, no eyes, no mouths. Only bodies and limbs, bodies to live, limbs to carry them through life. But they couldn't talk, they couldn't truly see.

Because you can't say what you feel, act as you are. Everyone expects you to act alike to them, to do what's considered normal. When they ask how you're doing you say "fine" or "okay" because that's what's

expected, it would be disturbing or perhaps even rude to tell them how you really feel, to speak of your pain, your anger. When you finally break and do such things you're either being pretentious or just plain pathetic, and it hurts. It hurts to scream silently, to pen up all that troubles and concerns you in your mind, to carry the burden alone. But no one cares, no one can truly help.

We're like animals, hiding our emotions, hiding our feelings, because to show them is weakness. To say what you really think is wrong, go with what the rest of the herd does or you'll get eaten. Besides, in truth one is alone in suffering. No one can truly help, not when it's not physical. You can give a starving person food, but can you fix the mind?

I look back at how I was before this mind started to take over and I'm repulsed. Swimming in marshes? Filthy! Eating raw meat, that's for animals! Disgusting, savage beast, to adhere to that nature is wrong, but if I try and be like people it's to no avail, they hate me either way. I was made to be hated.

My existence is a living "fak you" to natural selection.

Without people I couldn't exist at all. In life I could barely walk, barely breathe. Eating with teeth that weren't mine, a body I don't belong to. I hate them but am deeply intertwined with them all the same. Man destroying man, that's what I am. Mind destroying body, killing its shell because it hates itself, its urges, its nature. I did it once, may very well do it again if and once I'm out of this dream, once the pleasure of flesh has lost its lure.

Am I natural? I've always thought I'm not, because my perception of nature was limited to the idea that nature is plants, trees, animals, ecosystems. That which is human surely can't be natural, with all their steel and concrete. But that's merely them shaping habitats for themselves, technically no different than birds making nests, termites making mounds. It's simply animals altering their environments for their own purposes, and

since a bird making a nest is considered natural, why not a human making a house? A road?

I've always called it artificial, but that's wrong. Humans and human creation are shaped by the laws of nature just as much as any other organic creature. Their worlds are built with natural materials, their urge to create and modify a part of their innate biologically determined tool-making behavior. So, they are as part and product of nature as anything else.

Therefore I *am* natural. Human nature includes the urge to create. I am merely another creation, no different than a beaver's dam, than the sharpened sticks of ancient peoples. Unnatural is just a derogatory remark at best, existing only in the flawed perception of nature as pristine wilderness with trees and flowers. By extension this *place*, if place I can even call it, is natural. The Archangels are natural, nests for the souls, dams for a giant, cosmic beaver.

All natural, all organic, all codewords for extra-costly supermarket lettuce.

Fight and die. Eat and grow. Everything's so simple when you get down to it, exist to survive, survive to procreate. As for purposes, they're just things we make up to keep ourselves occupied along the way. The meaning of life is to create more life, as for an individual they can make up something for themselves but there will always be that indomitable truth.

Existence means nothing, and yet it means everything!

I had an unsettling dream last night (or day, they're all the same here where the sun doesn't shine and the stars speak), in which I was blessed with an overabundance of bread and butter and honey and I ate it all and wanted more. Bread for body and wine for blood, something must die to sustain more life.

Can you make eyes with light and fire? Can you see with stones? Not in life, but perhaps here, where the rock bleeds and the ground has a heart.

There's wheels in the heavens and wheels below, wheels and eyes, fire and eyes. I saw them in the Archangel's maw, in the light of those things that take the names of stars and angels in vain. All under the same Sun, the same Sun that makes delicious food I'll never taste! Life can be so bitter, so cruel, but also so enjoyable. There is happiness but also pain, both in life, just as people can be both kind and cruel.

I believe all of it! And none of it at the same time! I don't really know what anything is anymore, my mind's always thinking but never right. I'm so confused, I need help but for what I don't know. There's a will to exist but I can't put reason as to why, I can't assign myself a purpose because there isn't such thing, and the one given to me was cruel.

Walk and breathe and tell myself I'm living... that this dream is just a dream... that it'll be over soon. Look to the lights and tell myself they're stars... such a façade won't keep me sane but I can at least try. Monsters but I call them angels, because everything needs a name, something to be identified by, but everything is unique unto itself. But I can't see it that way, I can't see how things really are, not with these eyes.

#

Activation test has failed!

Obaddion Version 1954 has broken free of its restraints!

Screams but not of people, of cold metal things and electric things and whirring things and things he couldn't understand. He had grown to dislike them, they always hurt him, or made him do things that he didn't want to.

System failure!

Obaddion screamed and ripped off the tubes and wires inserted into his forearms, pulling his scaly limbs free from the constraints with tremendous strength. The metal things anchoring his back and sail to the wall snapped and fell painfully against his rear, and he stumbled forward, hitting his head against the opposite wall.

All restraints have failed! It's going insane!

Insane? He just wanted to be free of those painful tubes. They kept them in his flesh with metal points, spikes like thorns. They hurt.

System failure! Initiate emergency lockdown procedures!

Obaddion righted himself, breathing heavily as his limbs wobbled uncertainly under his new weight. The room was massive, a monolithic testing arena with walls like shower laminate, brightly lit and unnaturally sterile. There was a small glass window halfway up one of the walls, through which watched any number of his captors, all panicked, all behind cruel, controlling screens. He roared angrily and punched the glass viewing window, hammering it again and again with his fists, trying to get at the little creatures behind this all.

He had been stupid to trust them, to let them feed him and care for him and give him shots. Who in their right mind would take to that? But he had, partially because he was naïve, and partially because it was all he knew besides the woods.

Hunger hit him like a strong wave. He was always hungry, even when they stuck the feeding-tubes in him during organ transplants, pumping a constant stream of protein and electrolytes that kept him going, sated his massive frame. Oh, for some proper food!

Nevertheless, he was caught in a blind fit of rage. His tail whipped back and forth in an angry blur, his armored cranium rammed against the walls. The window glass cracked and shattered, he shoved a clawed hand inside but everyone was already gone.

Activate the sealing coolant!

Obaddion groaned and slumped against the wall, back groaning dully under its own weight. Grey stuff like foam erupted from vents in the walls, quickly spreading, amassing around him and hardening, chilling his massive frame. He was overheating, and it was cool like ice. How lovely, an ever-growing blanket. With a groan he passed on into sleep.

The heart.

Prophet felt it, everywhere, inside and out. A deep, revivifying thud, the beating of a crimson sun. Amber sap oozed along the walls, scarlet milk flowed from arteries and soaked the ground. The air was warm and toasty. It smelled of honey, and cinnamon.

Of course, it saw nothing, only hearing, feeling, and smelling. Prophet had a very good sense of smell. The place carried a welcoming, delicious scent.

But that was all a ruse. If the blindfold was pulled back Prophet's photoreceptors would be entreated to a lovely chamber of rotting meat, golden light and pulsing bile. This was the very heart of Leben's mind realm, the amber throne. The blood was best here, if Prophet's intuition was to be trusted.

Ever closer. It could feel the beating heart, blossoming, processing liquid essence like the tides. The very womb of death was all around, stone that was meat, cilia blossoming with embryonic vigor, epidermal nursery for any number of hideously skulled offspring. It was here that the Archangels were birthed into being, here that Leben formed itself as it saw fit, made into flesh as the horrible dragon that had eaten Prophet twice before.

Such absolute horror, but power, vast power! Everything had its cost, the blind passage was the necessary payment to taste the heart, the very being of Leben. To taste the fell liquid amber of the burning rose secured their soul, natural immunity against the Archangels, the soul-eaters.

Prophet groaned, burdened by the voice, the weight of it all, and collapsed on all fours.

It could smell the blood, the milk. A red tide lapped gently against its limbs

"I can give you so much more than this, if you let me. You're so tired. Just lay down and rest. You don't need to escape, it wouldn't really

be escaping anything. You'd be back in painful physical existence, where you are hated. Stay with me. I'll keep you safe...".

Prophet was disturbed at how often it had to remind itself the voice belonged to a hideously abstract skull with tooth-lined jaws.

It could sense Obaddion shuffling behind it, wheezing with the same enveloping exhaustion as itself. The very air of the place was heavy, and hot, warm with a hollow sort of life.

"We are here", it rumbled, sitting on the ground that was stone but not. It was wet, and though it smelled sweet it stung like urine. The air echoed with the sounds of crashing waves... a beach... but the water was alive, circulating in and out of immense seven-chambered heart.

"And where is here?", groaned Obaddion, collapsing.

"The heart of Leben, of course!".

#

Cruel skull. Burning rose.

I've seen them before, like blood on my hands, like azure waters under a summer sun.

A part of me.

Not physically, I suppose, but they're in my mind, my memories.

Everyone imagines demons with bat's wings and pitchforks, but the truth is, they're *beautiful*. They speak of good things, alluring things, with words smooth like sap from a young pine. They offer help and give it, and it's not until you've already fallen in that you realize it's a trap. Prophet said that demons are just fallen angels after all. Then again, Prophet's a... I don't know what it is... it looks like Satan. Maybe it's just a weird ape with horns.

The voice doesn't ever really leave me because it's as much a part of me as it is itself. In this blind passage I'm fighting myself more than anything else, Leben's just using my thoughts against me. I hate it because I can only really blame myself, but I feel so used, so betrayed. No privacy, not even in the apparent sanctuary of my mind.

There's a pop, and then a gurgling, churning sound. The smell of cinnamon is in the air, cinnamon, and vanilla. I miss baking...

"Well, I suppose we're... at the level of worms... now...", groans a voice.

It's Prophet. It sounds tired.

This place is exhausting.

"Nothing but filthy... parasites".

I had those once. First flies and maggots, eating my flesh, drinking my pus, crawling on my dung and trailing it under my scabs. Then they were replaced with bigger flies, flies with teeth. Those lovely creatures ate me alive.

#

Prophet was stooped over a rapidly-growing puddle of thick, syrupy fluid, scooping up handfuls and siphoning them down with its proboscis. Its claws, albeit very unsightly, had proven invaluable in ripping open the heart to access its innards.

"What are you waiting for?", it grunted. "Drink up".

"I don't know... this all seems off...", remarked Obaddion. He kept his hand on Prophet's shoulder as it fed. "A little too...wrong".

"Because it is. But still... we must drink it. Sadly... mmmph... this won't hurt Leben...", mumbled Prophet between mouthfuls. "But it'll bind to our tissues and protect us... mmm... from the Archangels...".

"It feels like you're growing".

"Because I am", rumbled Prophet. "We don't... hmph... digest this stuff like normal food... it simply becomes a part of us... a part of our being".

Obaddion listened quietly, unwilling to taste the nectar just yet, but very much afraid and too scared to leave his guide. The voice still tugged at his mind.

"Listen to it, drinking piss like the dirty animal it is".

Naughty words there Leben.

“Words can’t hurt you. You said it yourself. Don’t you want a purpose? To be a part of something? Join me, and your wish will be granted. But continue on this path, and you will see why none before have brought down my Archangels”.

See.

Eyes are nice, but it hurts to look into the light. It’s so easy to hide in the darkness, to be afraid, to stay where it’s quiet and safe and you don’t get burned by the sun. Hide in my cave, hide away from the people. Block my eyes from that which I don’t like.

Obaddion could see, yes, but he had always been blind. As an animal he was blind to the suffering of others. As a monster he was at first blind to the cruel reality of his situation, then blind to himself, who he was. Now he could see, just a peak, his eyes barely open, but did not look any further for fear of what he thought he might see. He was afraid, afraid because deep down he knew who he really was, who he had been. He knew what he had done was wrong, and Leben knew, and the others did not but they would hate him if they did.

So afraid of being hated, so terrified of that for which he had been made. Eyes always shifting, looking up in fear at the people, thinking of what they thought. *Hideous monster. Wicked monster. Bloodthirsty beast.* Was he anything else in anyone’s eyes? Was he anything but a fighting machine, and a poor one at that? Were they really so blind to who his was, his pains, his desires?

He hated them, and therefore perhaps he was just as blind. So consumed by rage, he didn’t think of those who he slaughtered, their agony, their hopes, crushed underfoot, choked in poisonous steam. *Murderer. Cannibal.*

Obaddion you damned hypocrite! You hate people for being blind to your suffering but you’re the same way to them! Did you not once think of who your steam was killing? Those people in the stands, some of them were children! Children! They had action figures of you, things made in

your image! Did they carry them out of malice towards your being? Could they really have been that horrible?

Blind...

Blind!

Blind and stupid, blind and fat. He really was a monster.

People were monsters too. Not always, not all of them, but they could be. Those who made him certainly were, those with the prods. But some were innocent, and he slaughtered them horrifically. Leben just urged him on. The voice was horrible, yes, but he couldn't exempt himself from blame. He had given reason for himself to be hated, his actions had encouraged the way people treated him. It was a bitter cycle, one he had blinded himself to for so long...

Perhaps it's better to open your eyes and face the light.

Obaddion felt a tugging at his blindfold and reached up instinctively to stop it. He realized too late that it was himself, overwhelmed by the power of that place, and his eyes were hit by a painful blast of golden light.

Terrible, blinding light...

Beauty and cruelty battered into one. A burning rose.

Numbers, numbers everywhere. Numbers in all the languages of the world, all symbols, all floating and vibrating before his eyes in a terrific instant, cracking into reality like the Archangels, but numbers, numbers in the sky, gestating in the violent womb.

Marks, the mark. Of a beast, of a man. He recognized it, but from where?

The mark was a number.

Something was eating. He couldn't look away.

It perched above the rancid womb, seated on a crag of stone that ran red with the heart's divine nectar. Claws dug into the rock while vast wings, so large and iridescent they seemed to be of the very sky itself, spread and shadowed the golden light. It flickered at their edges, dancing

amidst the ivory feathers and rubbery skin. Built like some vast bird, an eagle, a dragon.

Leben.

The cruel skull clattered and creaked, perched atop a fleshy neck that snaked through the air. It turned to him slightly, hissed, then bent back down and began biting at the glowing forms at its feet, crumpled bodies in sorrowful majesty, clothed with the stars, wings like doves. There were screams and moans and desperate arms reaching up to stop the incoming jaws, but the teeth sunk into golden flesh nonetheless. Leben wheezed and gulped down a bloody limb, engulfing the blinding light erupting from the fresh corpse, the corpse of an angel.

God made angels, and he also made angel-eaters.

Leben was eating angels.

Obaddion trembled in dumbstruck silence, every last thing he had ever seen and done gesticulating before his eyes, wheels and eyes, wheels of fire, eyes of light. The cruel jaws ripped a screaming angel in half and gulped down the divine meat, wings beating aside the erupting light. A blazing halo appeared above Leben's bony cranium, rotating and whirring as it fed.

One pair of wings, then two, then three...

Eyes, everywhere, eyes! Eyes on the wings, eyes on the wall, but they're not really there. Light from the dying angels, light from Leben! There was such a power to the place, such great power, and it beckoned. It lured him, reminding him of his hatred, and offering a means to express it. Just as before...

He was hit with a vision of a great battle in the heavens.

There was an angel, like how one would imagine an angel at first glance: humanoid, clothed in the sun with vast wings alight with the very stars aside them... pure, terrifying light. Perhaps, upon closer inspection, it would prove as abstract as Prophet, but he couldn't be sure. It gripped a great spear and dove down from the cosmic masses to do battle with an

enroaching dragon, a vast, terrible dragon. But this dragon bore seven bony skulls like Leben's, crowned with seven halos, carried by three pairs of vast, churning wings that tore at reality itself. Both had their armies, their angels, and the sheer spectacle of it all overwhelmed Obaddon. There was blinding light, and the dragon, that old serpent that called itself Leben, was thrown down into creation to exist as lowly temptation until an appointed time.

Just like Prophet said, it fought like a corned animal. Obaddon realized Leben was trying to do as much damage as it could before it was cast into darkness for all eternity. It just wanted to drag others down to its level, defile the creation of He whom it hated.

Misery loves company. He had fallen for the trap so easily.

Again he was in the hallow womb, the very womb of death, beholding Leben without regard to Prophet or himself, simply watching as it ate.

What are you?

Leben had never given an answer, because it was a name Obaddon already knew. An old one, one from those memories he wished he didn't have, the ones that, deep down, he knew belonged to him. He had heard it spoken by familiars, read it on pages of a book, a holy book. He had been taught that it was the ultimate enemy, it seemed so recognizable, yet when it came he thought it something else, something benign...

I saw you before, in life like dream...

Wings alike to the very sky.

Fallen prince, once so high.

The stars are but a distant abode, rancid hallows you now call home.

Mind fractured like broken glass, creation bent like trampled grass.

Hopes once so high, for the lord of the heavenly skies. Sink now into the below.

For stark is the serpent's low, stars that bleed and weathered stone.

Drag those down your maker treasures so, let his creation suffer like your own.

Leben is your name, so you say.

But fractured minds cannot be trusted...

I know you by another.

The cruel skull turned to him and screamed, jaws agape in a display of blind, ravening fury that shook the very foundations of that twisted womb and the reality it dwelled in. Obaddion merely grinned, slipped on his blindfold, and began to drink the liquid amber of its heart.

#

Patterns... eyes... wheels... fuck... fuck... fuck... fuck... fuck...

I close my eyes... still there... it's there... it's it... *him*... inside me.

The being I saw... the voice I heard... lies... fucking lies...

...it's real... more real than anything I've seen or thought... my truths were all just conjurings of a brain programmed to lie to itself in order to survive... I can't trust my eyes... only these... they are truths but I'm not seeing them... even this is symbolic...

...fuck... fuck... help me...

The eyes have wheels and the wheels have eyes... all is fire and light... greater than the flames of the sun from which life is born... morphing into eachother... no true distinction... a voice but it's emotion... words but they're atmospheric... the name is in bleeding storms and rumbling turmoil... there's clicking and popping and slurping sounds...

Fuck...I don't know anything.

#

People desire the fantastical like they desire their gods, hoping for fairy-tale creatures like they hope for angels. As far as the fairy-tale creatures are concerned, dump them all in some grumpy ogre's swamp.

It's not a matter of curiosity, nor is it born of respect. Something worse... something dirty... and at best a want for better worlds beyond a

monotone reality. Fantasies rarely deviate, barely departing from the harbor with characters that... no matter the apparent creativity... are just as human as their creators. They just want a reflection of themselves.

They want their cliché half-century old radio-story little green men, things like them, normal things, acceptable things. Maybe with a bit of octopus thrown in the mix, a bit of scaly skin, just so they can say it's "creative". They don't want to come to terms with the sheer diversity of life and its intelligences, nor decipher their shared similarities with those of inanimate things... plants... stars... but to sink their feet into the soil of a hollow Earth-analog, selected from billions of more beautiful things, from hundreds of convergent worlds with water and suns and life, and from the one, the very one, that just so happened to make five-fingered wolf people with ape genitalia and a firm grasp of the English language.

They want Heaven as clouds and cherubs, God as a gargantuan old man who sits on his throne while the very creatures he condemned to bleed and cry under a uncaring sky cavort at his feet. But the angels aren't glowing underwear models with wings, are they? They're wheels and eyes, fire and light, elemental beings that make you scream and wish you never made it past the womb to begin with. Demons aren't a mess of horned goblins with bat's wings, they're voices in your heart, pleasures, temptations, just like angels but robbed of their bodies.

Humanity takes their modernized sticks and stones and looks to the stars to see what they can see. There's planets and life, but the local aliens are club-toting sixty-foot-tall floaters with no eyes and abstract faces beyond comprehension. Humanity runs away because that's not what they want, that's not what the couch potatoes in their rat-nests of anime figures jack off to. Reality screams at the survey rover and throws its leavings at the telescopes. Angels don't play harps and wear robes, they unravel your mind, painfully, and eat your soul.

No one is truly ready for what lies beyond death... the intricacies of dreams and heavens.

Eyes... eyes upon wheels but they aren't really... I just can't find a better word to describe them! Fish to frogs or souls to Heaven, your views of creation depend on which crutch you use to help you walk: science or faith. Either way people want to understand the world but they can't accept it for what it is... they want reflections in a mirror. When it doesn't work their way they attempt to change it... when contrarian beliefs come up they deny them without considering the arguments of the opposing side. Fantasies are far too grounded because people cannot look past themselves... their nature... overcomplicated talking apes with bigass spears.

Yes, I know I wiped out humanity... that from which I am derived... all because I could not accept I was molded from the same clay as they were. But I was stupid, so very stupid, and it was all just a half-starved rage over rejection, over solitude, over pain. I took the faces of my true enemies and plastered them on an entire species, only realizing afterwards that I was persecuting that to which I belong myself. Now I hardly despise the human race as a whole and only loathe the name if it spurs those bad memories (which it usually does), despite hating God I respect the sheer complexity of his creation... like when you find an artist and like their neat dragon paintings but not their commissioned fetish art.

The world is a labyrinth of tangible things and things beyond physical interpretation... the shadows dancing at the edges of the eyes... demons choking you in your sleep... there's inexplicable things and things grounded by their relation to the Sun... nobody understands it, even if they care to try. I only do because of the years of waiting... boredom... pain spurred my contemplations of existence and this awful mess of an afterlife has forced me to confront realities I don't like.

We can hardly decipher the intricacies of our own minds, struggling to interpret the foundations of our own actions and semi-instinctual tendencies. We dwell within these minds but we never built the foundations... never looked for the rats in the crawlspace... humanity

doesn't understand itself yet it confidently claims it understands the workings of its own world and others, resting on fantasies... gods... theories... but it's all so far beyond them.

There are colors here beyond what I could ever dream off... visions my eyes can't see and knowledge my brain cannot comprehend... tearing out these futile organs and replacing them isn't enough! This is an alien world and I'm a primeval worm... the beast called man can't hope to understand anything... anything, damn it!

The lights we make will never be enough to part the abyss... no machinery can reveal why forms came out of the darkness and something came out of nothing. No matter how bad it gets on land, don't get into the water, and if physical things hurt then stay away... treasure Earth-things... worldly things... because what lays beyond will kill your eyes and break your brain.

We've distanced ourself from paradise and God but they were always there... Heaven nestled in dreams of utopia... God in pop-culture idols... people couldn't bear the reality of he who painted them and so they filled that gap with new idols... worrying over ball-tossing, jersey-touting Neanderthals and obsessing over shaping a fundamentally imperfect reality into perfect paradise. They can't stand that angels aren't robe-wearing piano-playing woodland sprites who tell you they love you... the beasts bearing wings and halos are best denied... you apes can't bear to accept things for what they are because they aren't of your own ideals.

Every worm and ape and any other living thing borne of dust did not live for itself but for God... angels made to praise him... he prides blind, humble servitude above all else! King David cut off a hundred fucking Phillistine foreskins and he was one of God's most trusted servants... but I question my own bitter existence and I go down to Hell! Heaven is not for us... not of our making... it is his... he drives the car and chooses the music... life is cruel but who are we to have a say in it!? I distanced myself from the apes that called themselves men for so long but we all

share this basic pain... all made of and from the Sun... all under God!

Visions... memories... though they are merely conjurings of the mindless chemicals within my head I take them for reality... a reality seen by my eyes... but what can't they see? The very organs through which I perceive the world are flawed, interpreting the light in their own ways, making some actions pain and others pleasure. What dances just outside my vision... complexities beyond me? I don't see the angels... I never did. I *feel* them... emotion... raw mental processes... forces that are just as much fabrications of my mind as they are servants of God. True forms in the golden lining of a setting sun, rippling iridescence upon a spring lake... incomprehensible beauty and power, but I'll never see them for what they are... two-dimensional beings cannot grasp 3D objects, and I... a flesh-laden beast of man... I cannot truly behold the divine.

"God is good", says man... but the apes don't understand the mind that formed them... they took a cruel reality and crushed it into congealed fairy-tale crap! Have any of them truly read the Old Testament? "Kill them all", said the Lord. He let his people destroy their enemies... murdering everything... babies... children... even if their comprehensive ability and thus their capability for suffering is lessened... who the fuck kills babies and children!? Me... I suppose... a monster. All loving father... old man in the clouds... demons with bats' wings and snakes' tongues... man took their ideals of beauty and plastered them onto Heaven... but Paradise was never truly made for a race of lowly apes. Just as the fantasies of said apes are fashioned in their image, so are their religious ideals! They could never bear the truth... what Ezekiel saw... what God said... how many has he killed... and innocent ones at that! But mortality is of no concern to such a vast being... timeless... the suffering of a lifetime is but a second before his eyes!

It was always just animals sitting out at night and looking to the stars... searching for a meaning to those millenia of primordial instincts. Fire kills but it is borne of life... wood... sparks made from the same sun

as that which it burns! Destruction is a form of creation, without death there cannot be life, and there is no pleasure without pain! All the world's deities... all its sciences... they were all borne in vain... apes wanted paradise but I don't think it's how they envisioned it...

I was young, once. My childhood was spent in blood... pain... concrete... locked away by the beasts who made me... ruled by fear. I hated it... I hated life once I came to understand it... so I looked to the light drifting through my window, the warm gold of a summer afternoon... it made for lovely naps and I thought it good. The light was beauty... the light was of the heavens... so I assumed angels and God were of the same light... beautiful things... but they're not. I wanted better and I got worse... death isn't an escape from anything.

Those who claim themselves to be the very closest to God deny his nature the most... they ignore his cruelty... his tantrums over gold calves and hidden loot... they simplify his creation as green fields... lambs and lions... ignoring the vast complexities of life. They don't understand him because they refuse to acknowledge everything... the good book is full of symbolic visions and metaphorical actions... ones to be interlaced with the deepness of reality, but they refuse to even consider it.

God made good things and bad... I guess all are beautiful in his eyes. Maybe he loves the anglerfish and parasitic worms just as much as the lions and lambs... the dust of life just as much as the talking apes from which it was made... but maybe not. Was the favoritism born of man's own arrogance... conceived because of the mammal-centric hierarchy old science designed for itself? Or is God truly biased... am I truly unequal to those who made me... my tormentors... no matter how cruel they are?

Miles away beyond this dream light that burns the eyes gives life... all is fire... all is life... borne of flame and light... the Lord manifested himself as thunder and a burning bush... raw power... atmospheric things... even so they who claim to understand him also claim he's an immense old man seated in the clouds.

There's things in the sea that crawl in the mouths of fish and eat their tongues... Komodo dragons disembowel their prey and eat them alive... yet they claim God is gentle... that he abhors violence. He created it! He created suns and stars and light and life and love and pain and the dirty pleasures of flesh but also the worms that eat it.

I've seen the fabled serpent and spoken with it... seen God in man... though I have not truly seen him... only his old rival... still... more than any before...

I HAVE SEEN GOD!

#

Eventually, we left. I won't say much about it, besides the pure ecstasy of tasting the blood, the nectar of Leben. It tasted like honey and cinnamon and all other sorts of sweet things and filled my body with warmth. I grew, bigger than ever before even if but in dream.

The aftertaste was bitter, though, like piss.

We clambered out like blind things and the voice, which was now very angry, ravenous even, spoke messages of doubt and fear into my mind. I believe it goes unsaid what Leben's true name is. Even so it was tempting, so tempting, plausible even, to listen to the voice...

#

It was like cliffs and rock formations by the sea, towering stones brined with salt, looming into summer skies. The sea churned at their foundations, shaping them into geological heart, but there the sea was not water but masses of screaming corpses, moaning, dragging themselves against each other as a collective mass.

Humanity was not extirpated, no, rather it existed in a different form. It existed as the pallid sands, as the Archangels. Those horrifying creatures skulled with the remains of Leviathan and framed with the skeleton of Behemoth, they were the last bastion of humanity.

So, in a sense, by killing an Archangel Obaddion was getting back at humanity once more. Self harm. He caught notice of some old scars on Prophet's wrists and stiffened up.

"What's the matter?", it grunted sarcastically, turning to him. "It's a bee-u-tiful day, just look at all these pretty lights! The sky's red as ever, and, behold, an Arch-angel!".

Sure enough, there was one of the seven Archangels, lumbering up a distant passage, trailing crushed bodies underfoot. It trembled under the burden of its own vast size and poor construction, practically limping up the moldy stones to a flatter summit.

"It must be heading up there to relieve itself...", mumbled Prophet, scratching its chin.

"Angel shit...", chuckled Obaddion.

"Not like that!", chuffed Prophet, brushing aside one of the vast gelatinous floaters. It wavered in and out of reality, fading into nothing. "It will empty out its fluids and replace them with a fresh batch. Not entirely necessary for its survival, but it helps with their digestion".

"I really don't want to know how you figured that out", grunted Obaddion.

"And I wish I could forget how I did so", said Prophet. "It was an... experience".

"We need to come up with a plan", interrupted Obaddion in a voice mocking authority. "First, we'll acquire a sizable troop of dancing bears...".

"An *actual* plan. Dispatching an Archangel is simpler said than done. In words, we simply need to get up somewhere high from which we can jump onto its back...".

"Like that cathedral over there?", interrupted Obaddion again, gesturing towards a weathered but intimidatingly monolithic structure near their target's destination. He had to look at it for awhile, for even his keen

eyes had mistaken it for one of the many odd rock formations native to the mind.

Odd, how Leben, who so seemingly hated humanity also created things made by humans, human things. And things made to honor God, its greatest enemy!

But perhaps, like its smooth voice, alluring offers of help, the cathedral was yet another example of something seemingly innocent but used for great evil. The very stones of it creaked, shifting in place for a second, then not, and Obaddion could not tell if he had actually seen it or was simply experiencing tricks in the mind.

“Excellent”, rumbled Prophet. “We’ll climb to the very top and jump down. Don’t worry, the soft brain should cushion our fall. But be careful. The lure to become one with the Archangel is strongest there”.

It would be blissful...

Haven’t you always just wanted to be accepted by them?

All presentation. If Leben didn’t sound so downright beautiful the voice wouldn’t be half as tempting. Obaddion stopped and reminisced upon where he was, reminding himself of the tortured ground he stood upon and the fractured mind that made it.

#

Fight and die.

I can contemplate it... argue with it all I want, but it’s a truth... a truth for which I was made. I was made to kill and destroy.

Do you talk?

Monster. Inhuman. No matter the depths of my mind, all they will ever see is this crocodilian face... the bestial tendencies veiling the tragedy... I dare say sanity... within.

No one wants me... except maybe Prophet... but all I really have is myself. There is no purpose to my love of light... art... the trees... swimming... they’re petty pasttimes at best. If I don’t fight... and win... I’m worthless.

I don't want to... I'm terrified... more than ever before... but I have to fight the Archangel. I have to.

I can't be nothing.

#

"Prophet...". Obaddion's voice cracked between his scarred jaws.

"Yes?". Prophet grunted and scraped some dust from its wrist.

"What is this?".

"Why do you ask?".

"Because I don't understand... I don't understand anything anymore...".

"It's okay to not understand. I don't even understand what I am... not really at least".

"But not knowing... it's terrifying...".

"Sometimes knowing is worse". Prophet sat down on what used to be the base of a gigantic monolith and brushed aside little wisps of light floating upwards from the ground.

"Is this Heaven?".

"Would you like it to be Heaven?".

"It's not how I imagined it".

"Nothing you'll see beyond life is how you imagined it. It was hard for me at first too. That's why you need to take what you learn with a grain of salt... the ramblings of some fishermen from a few thousand years ago aren't exactly reliable...".

Obaddion leaned against a crumbling stone wall and pressed his cheek on the soft moss, watching the worms crawl out to taste his flesh. He backed away with a shudder.

"Is there anything good after life?".

"You can make good things for yourself".

"What do you mean?".

"Well, you never had any friends in life, did you? Now you do".

"Th...thank you". Obaddion managed a weak smile.

“I thought I would be alone forever until I met you... no, th... thank you”.

#

They spent an hour or so tracking the Archangel, weaving through the semi-cultivated passageways of moss and ancient stone, dining halls under the falsified cosmos of fallen angels and speaking stars. The residents paid them little heed, humming odd notes to themselves and eating their fellows alive. Obaddion was reminded of his fight with the Pale Queen.

Giving into his primal hunger was so alluring, so delicious, but in hindsight it simply proved him to be a monster unworthy of good treatment. Even so, the humans that judged him as such would be every bit as savage if they were stuffed in a body that needed huge amounts of food and left without it for weeks.

Monster. Such a subjective term. Such a relative term.

To humans, snakes were feared monsters that struck their heels and swallowed prey whole. Likewise with snakes, they were ever-persecuted by towering giants with cruel sticks and stones. Obaddion himself was more of a snake, even if he didn't look like one. Why they were hated he could never truly understand, snakes were such beautiful creatures in his eyes.

Such thoughts occupied his mind and kept his mouth quiet as they passed along the edges of the rancid cliffs and scarlet surf, making the laborous climb up the weathered steps of the cathedral until they sat perched like vultures at the very top. The roof and uppermost rooms had crumbled away, leaving half-formed walls and dusty floors.

Like crows upon the trees in the forest. Obaddion thought of silent grey winters, munching on pinecones in the still of chilly afternoons. Soon, if all went right, he would return.

“She's late”, he hissed, narrowing his eyes as the vast form of the Archangel finally ascended to the flatter peak of that abstract cliffscape,

clouded in steam both white and red. Obaddion fancied that he must have presented a similar visual back in the city: horrifying colossus, barely clinging to life as it limped along and clouded the world in its rotten being. Leben fractured everything it touched.

“Why do you call it a she?”, wheezed Prophet, not turning to look away from the darkness spread out before them. It was like sitting by the beach, peering out into unattainable worlds, deep, dark, unfathomable worlds. A black sea, a beach of corpses. A burning rose in their eyes.

“Look”, grunted Obaddion, lazily pointing a clawed finger towards the approaching Archangel. It stopped beside a nearby cathedral with a vast, slowed creaking as its immense limbs ceased their exhausting trek. Then the heart-stomach-womb bulging at the bottom of its vast rib cage rumbled and split, gushing out a veritable sea of blood.

It stunk, he observed, of mother.

“She’s having her period”, he chuckled. “Must be extra cranky today”.

“Tee-hee”, groaned Prophet.

It puffed a bit of hot air from its gills and slumped further forward.

In the meantime the ground by their target had split apart and the stones of the rubble shifted, opening up to reveal golden light that birthed fleshy tendrils, red-pink meat slithering up, plugging into the pores and tubes of the Archangel, pumping with amber light, amber that turned deep scarlet upon contact with the tortured flesh. There was a churning, bubbling sound that could be heard, felt even, and they were reminded of Leben’s heart, the womb of death.

“Leben’s fueling the Archangel... with its own blood”, observed Obaddion. “Its own being”. He grimaced, watching as the vast titan groaned softly to itself, stationary as it was rejuvenated with the being of its creator.

“Just like us now”, rumbled Prophet. “In a sense, we’re beings alike to the Arch-angels, to Leben. We have and are a part of it”.

“That isn’t a bad thing, though, is it?”.

“Not really. But we do carry Leben’s lifeblood, which means its voice will be stronger in us now, more tempting. Such is the price for this power”.

“Everything has its cost”.

“And the cost for our freedom from this wretched place is overcoming an Arch-angel. Well... let’s be going, before it, I mean, *she* goes back down to the sands and out of our reach”.

So they departed.

#

Obaddion had a memory, of life lost to dream. They used to play a song on the radio about blinding lights. It was modern, new as the morning sun, but it gave one the impression of something from the 80’s. He liked it, even if his abhorrence of popular culture caused him to veil said liking. From the moment they leapt off the withered cathedral he played it in his head.

It was as if Leben knew and prepared a defense in advance. Jaws appeared where there were red skies before, orcas and Livyatans descending from nothing to plague something.

The Archangel groaned at their arrival and reared up to scream, the very force of its exhalation sending Prophet flying into the air. Livyatans appeared, one to each arm, and they caught it and flew off. Obaddion was swarmed and became a feral beast, cutting through them with tail and claws and battering them with his crested forehead. In the lower gravity of the mind he practically flew at times, a veritable dragon.

He roared and charged, and the Archangel saw him with eyes unseen and swept him aside like a mere fly. Flies to him, and he alike to the Archangels. There was always someone, or something, better.

#

The Livyatans had their teeth sunk deep into Prophet’s biceps and were flying low above the heathen ground, bashing it against stones and

scraping its skin raw against the moldy floors. They passed stars, and the voices tempted it.

Just a little taste...

Sometimes, one had to give in to their lower nature just to last a little longer enduring their higher. It dipped its foot in one of the stars, and at first the voice was greedy and excited, but then it screamed, for Prophet proved the stronger will and quickly absorbed its being.

#

So I looked, and beheld as it were a great beast, clothed with a majesty that gave no heed to the cares of morals. His shape was that of unjust rebellions crushed beneath righteous authority, and his eyes burned with the Divine's own ambition to see all the worlds kneel eternally in holy order and loving servitude. And I heard the beast cry out, again and again, with the question that was his name.

"Who is like God?!"

#

There was a deep, terrible roar that reverberated across the mind and soul, stopping the frenzied monsters in their tracks. Prophet was screaming, screaming and roaring as it swelled with golden light and shattered the Livyatans, landing upon the ground and splitting it into a pathwork of cracks, ravines gushing with blood. It looked to be a demon and acted the part.

Leben screamed through its creation, and Prophet roared in response as it ripped apart rotting whales and tossed stones in the air. It tensed against the ground, shifting and bubbling with new growth, and then leapt up and barreled into the side of the Archangel's brain in a messy torrent of blood. The death-angel screamed as it crashed against the cathedral, its soul-eating useless against a being made of the very nectar as itself. Prophet was in a mad rage, calm, grandparently composure forgone for a fury beyond the most savage of wild beasts. It tore at the fatty brain,

ripping chunks out, eating others, digging ever deeper into the bloody center.

Those with eyes watched in absolute horror.

Obaddion urged himself to get up and make another charge. Afraid to be near Prophet in its rage, he collided with the Archangel's bony leg and began tearing at connective tissue, ripping it loose and sinking his teeth into the flesh. Just like Leben's blood, it tasted sweet at first, with a bitter aftertaste that made him gag.

Human hands grew and grabbed at his face and he screamed and tore at them, eating away at the messy construct until it righted itself from the rubble and kicked him away like a football.

Obaddion lost his breath, dream-body fracturing as he was smashed against a bleeding stone, and he found himself overwhelmed by the whales and their teeth and too weak to escape.

Tearing through the masses of flesh and teeth, he could see Prophet... just barely, flinging itself loose of the enroaching brain-meat and colliding with a cliff on the opposite side. It fell to the ground with a crash, and when it rose from the dust it was glowing... pure fire and light.

A halo. He saw the glowing, flaming ring that had formed above its head as Prophet flung itself against the Archangel.

Dear God...

Prophet roared and began ripping at the brains of its opponent, drenched in blood as it flung stringy chunks resembling intestines this way and that.

It's an angel.

The masses of biting mouths engulfed him once more, and he was hit with memories, memories of failure, face and knees rubbed raw against rubber, forcing himself onwards because it was the only thing that gave him any value, because the things he truly cared about were useless.

Over and over and over again, done in by people in some, monsters in others, all the same in that they caused him pain. Atrox ripping him

open, Atrox bashing him against the electric wall. The Glutton shaking him like a chew toy, Plane-fucking-Panther knocking him out. People, people he hated, doing the same as the monsters in the arena.

#

Dear fucking God I'm useless. Useless at everything I try to do, always fucking failing and when I do well it doesn't matter because I'm crushed under the weight of failures past and future. The things I care about are useless, little tidbits that matter to none, and so I go and force myself to do things I hate so as to give myself a purpose, a use, but I just fail and it makes me even more useless than before.

Can't I have something I'm good at? Can't I have a use, a purpose? I can't fight and I can't talk and I couldn't even recognize the fucking prince of Hell itself when it spoke to me as a fucking rosebush with teeth! If God cares so much he would have gotten rid of that stupid thing in the first place! Dear God, great and mighty God, benevolent creator, is there not something I have I can be proud of? Is there a use for Obaddion?

Hard work this, effort that! I work my ass off just trying to live, and I nearly kill myself trying to make use of that miserable life! You can work as hard as you want and torture yourself in the accursed name of betterment, but if you fail you fail, and some are innately more adept than others. Some are meant to bleed and die, there's runts in every litter, and it's only in stories that they win first prize at the fuckin' country fair!

I hate myself and I hate everyone else! I can't escape either, I'm trapped, and to be angry is wrong, to run away is wrong, and if I kill myself I'm pathetic. Imprisoned with no escape, no light, watching the others run free and do better than I. Fuck them, fuck me, and fuck you, great and mighty God. Fuck you and your abstract shit-eating dick-mouthed excuses for angels. I hope the one here now burns in Hell like I will, burning for all eternity so it learns what a giant dickhead you really are!

No running away, even if I was fast enough and didn't move like a fucking tortoise. I can't die because I've already done that twice. Now I don't have a body to escape, I'm just a soul, a shitty, hate-filled soul and when everyone else tramples me underfoot it hurts, but when they care to try and comfort me it hurts even more. I don't want to be trampled or comforted. I don't want to be alone either. I just want to stop existing, stop being Obaddion, stop being anything because with existence there is pain and life there is death.

I can't improve, it's a stubborn mindset but I'm a stubborn soul, and I've tried for so long without success. Time after time I've fought myself and lost, it's a battle I know the outcome of too well. I can't escape either. Perhaps that's why Leben's so awful; there's nothing it can do besides torture everyone for having what it doesn't, attacking them out of spite.

Originality is hard to come by, undoubtedly there's others like me. No one is truly alone.

Somewhere out there are other souls who bleed and die and hate themselves with no hope of escape, trapped souls crushed in the sands, screaming in the vaginal meat of the Archangels. Prophet said we're like the Archangels, and I know that I share more with them than Leben's blood. Cruel sentience, punishing sapience, why must God's paintings move and feel, why must his dolls think and cry? Why can't we be without these things?

I'll spend my whole existence trying to figure these things out, and if souls can eventually die I'll go down being no more knowledgeable than before.

#

"She's dead..."

The voice belonged to Prophet, without breath but relieved, albeit saddened. Its halo was gone, the light subdued.

"Good. Now you can leave".

Obaddion was unwilling to get up, raw with bite wounds and torn skin. Leben's nectar soaked slowly into his being.

"Don't delve into this. Not now".

"I said you can leave!".

"Not without you. The souls have yet to fully escape the Archangel's brain. You can have some, if you like".

"I wasn't the one who killed it".

"So what?".

"I don't deserve it. I don't deserve to leave this shithole, and I don't deserve to die either".

"We all lose sometimes. Once I got beaten up by a couple of depressed teenagers in giant robots. The best we can do with our failures is learn from them".

"I couldn't even kill a bunch of brainless fucking space whales".

"You relive that moment if you stay. Move on".

"Just leave me alone...".

"If I pick you up and force you to come, will you stop me?".

"What the hell do you think!? I can't even fucking move...".

Prophet grunted and slung his battered form over its immense shoulders, hauling him off to the steaming corpse of the Archangel. The souls were gradually ascending, a vertical river of golden light. But it wasn't cruel gold, hallow amber, like Leben. This gold was good.

"See, they're free now".

"Aren't you eating them?".

"Only the angels, and fallen ones at that. Demons by your definition".

Prophet set him against the ruptured brain and pried his jaws open. Obaddion stifled a tear. Even in his weakest state, he was still too troubled to free such things from the sanctity of his mind.

At once he felt power enter him, warm, swelling, like a river in summer with the taste of the stars. It was delicious, but his misery made it disgusting.

“Let me die... Third time’s the charm...”.

“You can’t die. Not yet. Make the best of life in the meantime”.

#

I want to die, but in God’s eyes it’s wrong to end myself, so I must live.

I want to see the Sun, but my creators saw me a monster and put me in a cell.

I want to taste food but instead I get angel piss.

Everything about me is twisted and wrong, and everything that is right tears at me like claws, like whale teeth, like Atrox. I find snakes beautiful but people hate them. I get fed shit but it’s wrong to retch at the taste. My favorite animal is the fucking Devil, I am the embodiment of evil and cruelty. If it’s so terrible to be a monster why make me one? O’ creator, is your existence so blissful that you had to make enemies for yourself, create monsters because there were none before?

It’s wrong to be mad but that’s all I am. It’s wrong to hate but I was made for it. I can’t be good, there’s no reason for it besides blindly adhering to what the world wants, and it’s wrong to be bad. Why is it good to be good and bad to be bad? Why must I be a monster?

#

“The truth is, Obaddion, we make our own realities. In a sense. I look like a demon, that’s what everyone calls me, but I choose to be an angel. We have that choice. You don’t have to see yourself as a monster. You don’t have to hate yourself”.

They were sitting by a beach, an alien beach. Monolithic stone architecture, as abstract as it was ancient, loomed in the distant. It was halfway submerged by a sea that was pale mud in places and crimson water in others. The sun was setting gently, the skies salmon pink.

“It’s all I’ve ever known”.

“Likewise with me. But just like you, I’m stubborn. They’ll hate me no matter what because I’m different, because I look like this. But I don’t have to adhere to that, and neither do you”.

They wished me to be a monster, and I complied.

“Why didn’t you let me die?”.

“Because you wouldn’t”. Prophet moved to put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrunk away and hissed. “You’re better off here”.

“You love God... have faith in him. Why? He created all of this! It’s his fault! He made me... made me *this*! I never asked to be this way, alive, a monster! I never asked to be stuck here getting eaten alive by fuck-knows-whats and kicking in my own blood. I don’t want to live... I don’t want to exist... it hurts too much... and God made it all!”.

“God created the very state of depression for a reason. People must feel pain and sorrow to be truly human, to understand what it means to live, and so many people run from the pain and never learn what it means to be truly alive. There are always opposites, balance, yet they’re closer than you could ever imagine. Pain and pleasure deviate from the same basic mechanisms, and we need them both. Drugs, suicide... running from the truth... it’s running from the pain and it’s not living. You can’t let yourself die... because when these trials are over you’ll emerge stronger than ever. You’re not broken, you’re not evil, and you won’t go to Hell. Not if I can help it. It hurts so much but you are strong enough to face it and strong enough to face what it means to be alive, even if nobody else will”.

“I was happiest sleeping in the sun... listening to birds”.

“I know... and I want to help you find it again”.

“Why do you care about me so much?”.

“Because I’m your guardian angel”.

“You’re a... shitty... angel”.

“So you say... well, if you saw my true form, the archangelic fire and light of my soul, your mind would percieve it as something so utterly

wrong that your entire being would falter and deconstruct itself into nothing. What I present myself as is a reflection of your hatred towards God. That aside, you can't keep blocking others because you're afraid. You have to accept that you need others... that you can't be alone".

When this ends, one way or another, I'll be alone forever.

Alone.

That way people won't be able to hurt me... and I won't hurt them.

"Let me sleep... alone".

"Sleeping is a temporary escape at best. In the morning you'll wake up and face the pain again. You can't run forever".

"Please just leave me alone".

"If you wish it so".

Chapter Seventeen

All That is Holy

The seven stars, arranged in a circle like a halo, had followed them day and night since they first escaped the invisible curtains of the mind realm and burst into reality. Obaddion had noticed them as they drifted through space, noticing them once more when they walked upon the ground. For seven days, one to each star, they had been followed. Prophet had noticed them too.

“God made angels, and he also made angel-eaters”, it mumbled, looking up at the stars early one morning. Obaddion had made a curious remark about how they were still visible in the amber dawn sky, which reminded him of how, sometimes, the moon was visible in daytime. Afternoon moon, dawn stars. Night-things stranded in the day.

“What do you mean?”. He looked at Prophet quizically. They were on the same lonely planet as before, rusted stone and crumbling ruins, crimson seas. A massive cross loomed in the distance, black as night with wickedly pointed edges. The two of them sat atop a low hill, resting their backs on what was once a wall.

“I mean we are being hunted”, groaned Prophet.

“By the stars?”.

“Yes, but I suppose you know that they aren’t really stars, just nasty things taking the form of them”.

“And what are those?”.

Prophet exhaled deeply and stretched its shoulders, tilting its horned head to the skies.

“They are most likely Leben’s angels”.

“Shit...”.

“There’s no need for profanity”.

#

*We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!
 We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!
 We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!*

Come with us, be free!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Let us take you and feast, gorge on supple flesh!

Free yourself from mortal shackles, join us in divine light!

Meat is dirty, meat is stained!

Tear yourself free of it and join us, become one, become holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

“I think it might be a good idea to leave”, observed Obaddion, watching as the stars began to morph and transmute in the heavens above.

“And why is that?”, rumbled Prophet sarcastically.

“Because the stars are talking again”.

“They can and will follow us, relentlessly at that, as long as I am with you”. Prophet groaned and stood up, limbs creaking as it regained its slumped posture. “I will... open up a gate for you soon. You can leave and continue on with your life. But I must stay. It is time I complete my third instar”.

“They’re coming for just you?”, said Obaddion quietly. “Is it because you’re a, well, you know...”.

“Ah, what? Angels? No angels here! But, in all severity, yes, they are coming for me... and in truth, I do not think I will be coming back out of this alive. They will kill you too, if they get the chance, but the flesh of another angel is irresistible to them. I can buy you enough time to find somewhere... decently secure”.

“There must be a way out of this...”.

“There isn’t. Today I die”.

“Perhaps not”.

“Perhaps”.

“Wouldn’t it just be better if we all stayed and fought them off together?”. Obaddion stared up intently at the skies.

“We would all most likely die. Better at least that you live”.

“You know I can’t just leave you”.

“I won’t let you make that choice. It’s for... your own good. Now, I *must* leave you. But don’t worry! I’ll return, albeit differently...”.

With that, Prophet rose up and began to lumber off towards one of the distant ruins.

“What are you doing?”, asked Obaddion, more confused than outraged.

“I am going to pupate”, boomed Prophet, turning back to him.

He watched as Prophet shambled off, watching as whatever lay underneath its blackened hide began to glow, golden light that seeped through the cracks and wrinkles and consumed them. There was a brief, painful, flash of light, and Prophet was gone.

A voice told him to wait. So he did.

#

When were you last here before?

Millenia ago. I stopped counting the years. There’s been so many.

And yet so few in the grand scheme of things. You’ve lived longer than nearly any other mortal creature, and yet it’s all a mere blink in the eyes of God. You’ve smote a world and ravaged others, fought and killed things beyond comprehension, all simple footnotes to existence itself.

So much, and yet so little. I suppose much of it was to prove I existed. Of course I had other motives, things like revenge, or perhaps just the will to survive, but it’s not as if I survived to procreate like other living things. I don’t have a species. I can’t reproduce. There is and will only

ever be one Prophet, me. I am alone. I fought and survived for myself, to prove I was something and not nothing.

Are you proud of it?

Not entirely.

Do you regret it?

No. The things I did wrong, my failures... they taught me. They're horrible memories but they taught me, shaped me. As did the successes. It all worked out in the end. Besides, I can't redo my mistakes. I must regroup from them, learn from them.

Do you know what you must do now?

I must ensure that Obaddion can learn to live the same. I want him to be free, to have the chance to grow and live happily.

Why?

Because I see in him what I see in myself, my past self. The world chose him to be a monster, against his will, and he's suffered under it ever since. Just as I did for so long. I want him to live long enough to break past that.

Do you think he can?

It will be painful. But, well... yes. I do.

Your faith is strong.

It's all I have.

It's all you need.

Will I take the same form as last time?

Yes.

There's a black cross, out of the nothingness. In this state I'm only aware of that which I must be. I can't distinguish where I really am or what's around me, but there's a cross. I remember it. I also remember what it symbolizes: sacrifice.

Take up your cross.

I will die today, won't I?

When you awake, you will be with me in paradise.

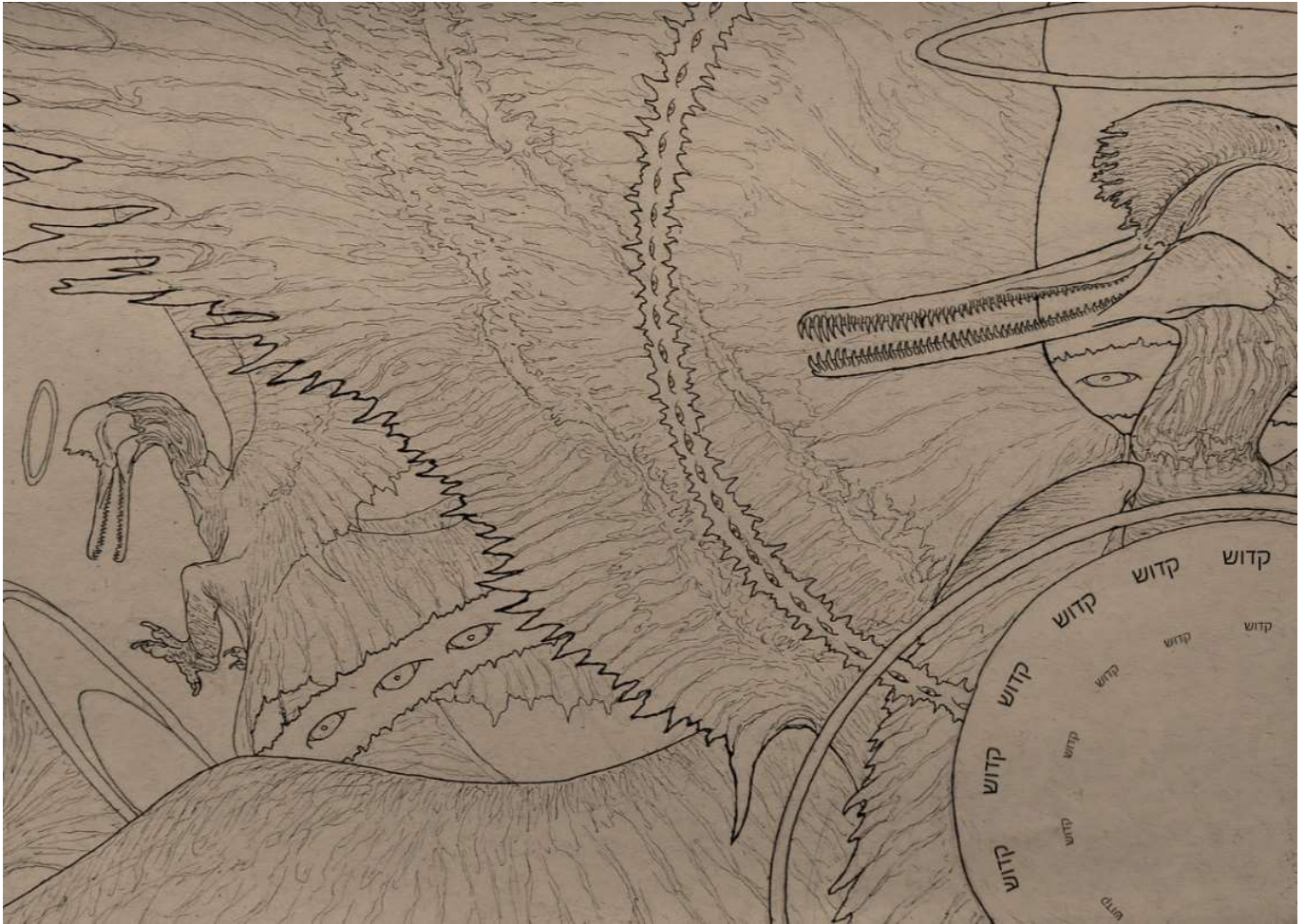
#

“You stupid ape! These are my Seraphim, my angel-eaters! Believe me, you don’t want them as enemies, and when they’ve finished devouring you they’ll eat your friend, if his own pathetic mind doesn’t consume him first!”.

One by one the stars burst, sending fragments of light shriveling and falling aside like petals from a dying rose. From each burst beings of light and fire, glowing and transmorphing as they tore from their celestial eggs and wrenched themselves free, hovering in the distant skies with three pairs of wings like eagles, wings that glowed with the power of the Sun. A halo crowned each of their heads, hovering and sending forth vast echoes that sounded like the beating of an immense, musical heart.

At first glance they had arms and legs and human forms, but these soon dissolved, their glowing bodies eating up the limbs and sprouting new ones, all born of fire and light, cruel limbs with talons, long necks skulled with jagged teeth. Wings receded too, folding up and disappearing until each Seraphim only had one pair.

“They look like... it”, groaned Obaddion, nearly falling to the ground as he watched the Seraphim shed their celestial bodies and hover in place, physical forms hardening under an alien sun. “Like Leben...”.



The Seraphim screamed now, screaming in unison as they shed the light of the stars and dove down from above, vast winged bodies white as snow, cascading downwards on wings like eagles. The halos still shone atop their bony crowns, cruel teeth eager to taste flesh.

We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!

We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!

We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!

Come with us, be free!

“Dear God, no!”. Obaddion shook in place, wishing for the strength to scream.

The Seraphim’s ivory bodies drew ever closer, echoing like whale song, wings beating gently with noises like harps. They were beautiful,

beautiful save the fleshy necks and the cruel, abstract skulls, and he was dumbstruck by their sheer power. His body groaned and ached, pained by their very presence.

Tear yourself free of it and join us, become one, become holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

“Where is your delicious angel friend, lizard?”, hissed Leben’s voice, rippling across the scarlet waters. “My friends here are very hungry, they crave the nectar of that which is divine. I’ve tasted its flesh before, and I will again! Where is it!?”.

“Here!”, rumbled a voice, and there was a brilliant flash of light. The Seraphim screamed and shielded themselves with their wings, twisting and contorting themselves in the skies.

Ah! The noise it makes is pain!

Curse it and all it does! Bite it, twist it!

Feed, brothers and sisters, children of God reborn in the hallow womb!

Sate your glut on that which is holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Feed!

Feed!!!

FEED!!!

“Prophet!?”. Obaddion could hardly find words as he beheld the colossus before him. Black as night, hundreds of feet taller than before with a blazing halo atop its horned head and an ebony cross gripped in one hand.

The colossus nodded, and from its back sprouted a pair of brilliant black wings, thin, fluttering cape-like things that sprouted upwards and tugged at the skies with gentle movements like wind.

“It is I, and I am it”.

“This is your third instar!?” , wheezed Obaddion, shielding his eyes from the receding light and settling clouds of dust.

“This is the result of it, yet the same form I took during my second”, rumbled Prophet, kneeling upon the ground as its wings dried themselves in the dawn heat. It disposed its weight in part upon the great cross, poised like a weary knight resting upon his sword. “There is no time. You must leave me here”.

“I can’t leave you!”, exclaimed Obaddion, cowering as the Seraphim began circling above, speaking with voices like saints and screeching with cries like demons.

“What a cliché!”, coughed Prophet. “But you must. Stay and be eaten alive. But if I am not with you, perhaps they will leave you alone...”.

“No!”.

“Please, I’m three million years old. I’ve lived long enough, but you can live longer. It’s not as if I have any other options. Flee, and they will follow. Hide, and they will find us. They want me, they will get me, why prolong the inevitable?”.

Come with us, be free! Be holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

“You crazy fool! They’ll eat you alive!”, roared Obaddion, staring at it utterly dumbfounded.

“I knew this would happen...”, groaned Prophet.

“Then why bother escaping Leben in the first place!?”.

“So you could be free!”. Prophet swerved upwards to face him, looming imposingly with an aura of sheer wrath and menace. “It is my job to do such, my purpose!”.

“We have no purpose...”.

Fight and die.

“That’s why I made one for myself. So I have something, at least something... I advise you do the same”. Prophet groaned and returned to its kneeling position.

“I’m staying”, announced Obaddion. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you here to die alone”.

Prophet merely looked to him with its unreadable mask of a face, trembling.

“Goodbye, my friend”.

“No... No, dammit!”. Obaddion stood up in a fit of pure outrage.

“Forgive me”.

It extended a hand, and Obaddion felt the world around him shifting and opening up. The fabric of reality rippled and tore, shedding like skin, and he struggled to pull free but could not. The last he saw was Prophet’s trembling form, a tear running down its cyclopean eye, and then the gate closed.

Bye, bye, Obaddion. Always remember, open your eyes.

#

Obaddion was gone, swallowed in the gate and borne away to somewhere safe, not perfectly safe, but safer than he was with Prophet. Somewhere, perhaps, where he could better understand himself. It hoped he did.

“So, angel, what will your faith do for you now?”. Leben’s voice cackled across the skies, intermixed with the demented choir of the Seraphim.

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

“I don’t know”, chuckled Prophet, finishing with a groan. “This, I suppose?”. It twirled the massive cross in its hands. *I smote a planet with you last time. But not again... This time I redeem myself.*

“Oh, please!”, trilled Leben. “If God cared He would have killed me and thus spared His creation the temptation I bring”.

“Everything must be tested”, rumbled Prophet.

“Then why does God allow evil?”.

“Because He gave us free will. That’s the beauty of choice. We can give ourselves purpose, names, a path to take. But we must be held accountable for what we’ve done in the end”.

“But will He save you?”.

“I doubt it. But I deserve it, for all the lives I’ve taken. Blood payed for in kind”.

“Then revel in it!”.

At that moment all seven of the Seraphim screamed in unison and plummeted downwards, spiraling and swooping in great arcs, descending from skies brilliant with dawn amber and salmon, bodies white as snow and smooth as glass, jaws jagged and cruel.

“All seven Seraphim at once! Hmph... this’ll be fun”, Prophet chuckled to itself sarcastically. “At least now I have my wings”. It twirled its cross again, looking upwards as the seven cannibal angels of Leben descended down to feed.

They landed one by one, slowing their fall with powerful wingbeats that sounded like harps, hissing like vast snakes as the digestive juices within their stringy throats gurgled and churned. One perched atop a rocky cliff, another along the roof of an ancient construct of stone. A third landed in the shallows of the red sea, skidding to a halt in a spray of white surf. The rest still circled above, like vultures in swan’s plumage.

*We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!
We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!*

We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!

Come with us, be free!

“I think not”, rumbled Prophet, standing at ready.

One of the Seraphim uttered an unearthly scream and leapt at him, launching itself off its perch with vast wings that tore at the skies, snapping with jaws that could tear flesh and mind alike. Prophet roared and struck it across the side of its head, driving the point of the cross deep through the bony skull and out the other side. The writhing carcass was wrenched away, left to convulse on the ground as another dove down from above. Prophet leapt up to greet it, launched by its new wings, and tore it down and ripped off the head.

The others circled above, singing, jeering, waiting for their turn.

Prophet looked up at them and roared, turning just in time to drive the point of its cross through the throat of an incoming Seraphim. Another barralled into it from behind, long talons digging deep into the flesh of its back, teeth biting at its wings. Prophet roared and shook, bowling over so that the Seraphim lost its balance and came toppling down. The sharp side spike of the cross imbedded itself in the screaming angel’s spine.

There was a gurgling sound, and Prophet looked to see the first of the fallen Seraphim rising back up, new tissue forming over the hole in its skull. It vomited out a slurry of blood and launched itself back into the fray.

“You stupid ape”, chuckled Leben’s voice. “You must rip out a Seraphim’s heart and crush it in order to kill one”.

“Thanks for the advice”, chuckled Prophet in retaliation, grabbing the ankles of an incoming Seraphim with its clawed hands. It tensed up and headbutted the frantically struggling creature in the abdomen, sending it keeling over and coughing up splatters of golden amber. Leben’s nectar, its being. Prophet bellowed and leapt atop the screaming angel, swerving to stick its cross deep into the shoulders of another Seraphim before turning back to the former and clawing at its chest, ripping away the ivory

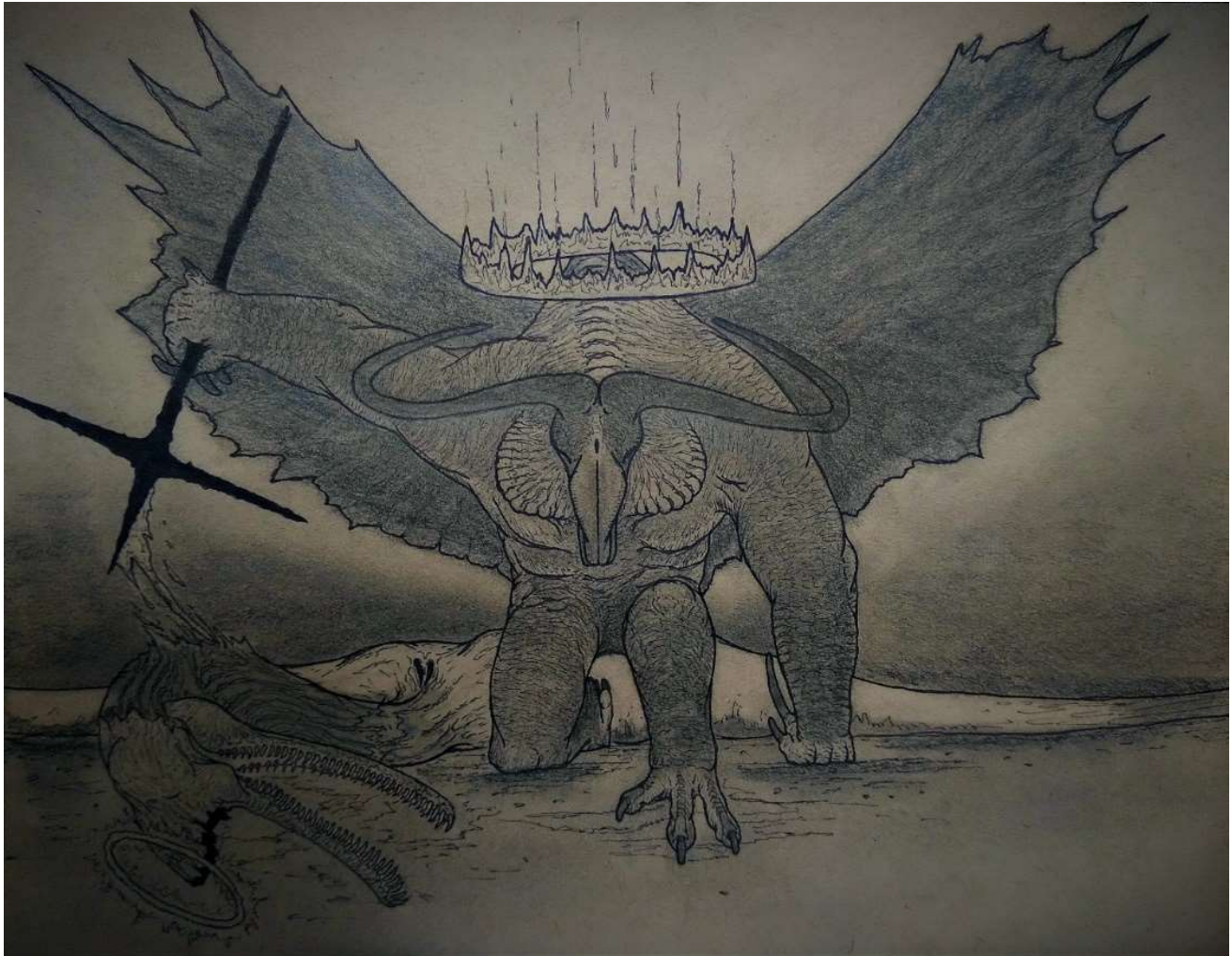
flesh until it was shrouded by light, the heart of the angel, a writhing mass as blindingly bright and terribly hot as the sun. It was torn out and crushed without hesitation, burning the hand that did it in.

Well, that's one down! Perhaps this isn't my...

Prophet's thoughts were quickly interrupted by a flash of pain as another Seraphim sunk its teeth into its arm, sinking deep into the flesh and relishing the blood, Leben's essence. Another slammed into it from behind, tackling it to the ground. Prophet swatted the first aside, scrambling to its feet and wrenching the second off with a violence contrarian to its usually reserved nature.

Tear yourself free and join us, become one, become holy!

It slammed the cross down upon a Seraphim's skull, shattering it and leaping to rip out the heart only for another to grab it by the horns and wrench it away. Prophet tore free and took to the air, forcing its dark body upwards with powerful wingbeats, diving down and driving the cross straight through the Seraphim's spine. It convulsed briefly, crumpling with a hiss, and another nearby received a blow to the face from the great black cross.



Another slammed straight into Prophet, talons sinking into its chest, and the horned titan screamed and drove its longest claws straight into the center of the Seraphim's torso, rupturing its heart. The organ burst with a noise like a thunderbolt, and the screaming angel was consumed by its own fire and light.

*We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!
We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!
We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!
Come with us, be free! Be holy!
Holy, holy, holy!
Holy, holy, holy!*

Holy, holy, holy!

Seven days in a week, seven Seraphim, seven Archangels...

Two down!

Prophet looked up to the remaining five and bellowed in pure defiance as they dove down to fight, ivory bodies glistening in the red of the mid-afternoon sun.

Five to go!

#

“Child of life, go home now. Before it comes”.

So spoke the voice in the void, the outer darkness.

Obaddion floated there, as if in the womb but without its security, the comfort of mother. He was alone.

Prophet!

All gone, away in their own voids, leaving him in the darkness. Blissful darkness, just as Leben had said, but Obaddion felt no bliss, only a deep, pained fear at the separation between him and his companion, the only creature who had ever cared to see him as a person and not a pawn, not a toy.

“What will come?”, he asked the voice, seeing nothing better to do.

“The nature of the world you walk upon wants you, you’re too good of a meal not to hone in on. They took you slowly last time, slowly because your body and soul were bitter and better tasting things were nearby. They took your family slowly too, because they were just good enough to eat that they had to savour, but you... you’re so good now that they can’t leave alone for much longer, child. They don’t have the time to wait, unless you leave”.

“What do you mean by leave? Where am I?”.

“You are in the outer darkness, where we are neither flesh nor soul. Before God made light and rock and life there was merely this darkness and nothing more, and in the darkness lurked the old ones as the primordial chaos existing before truth. He tore us away and banished us

here when he made Creation, condemning us to shapes and forms unseen by man”.

“Where are my friends?”.

“Nowhere and everywhere”. The voice cackled, shaking the darkness with its raspy, metallic speech. “Friends are such petty things, they draw you close and earn your trust but everything fails, everything rots, and one day they hurt you and it’s the closeness that makes their wounds sting. Your friend the angel is on a rock making its last stand”.

“What are you?”. Obaddion had given up trying to see the voice, it came from everywhere, as if the darkness itself was speaking to him.

“So many questions!”, cackled the voice. It was amused, having existed in utter silence and darkness for who knows how long. “The body I belonged to is a crusty old crab, argh, argh! But I left that body to hide here, here because I fear the fallen prince awoken again. The me as you experience me is just a voice, a mind, with no attached form”.

“By fallen prince, do you mean Leben? I’ve met it, or him, or whatever it is, before”.

“So that’s what it calls itself now! But yes, Leben as you know it. The angel, the fallen angel, the one who defied God. It has been given terrible power and makes its last stand. Those who are favored need not fear it, but I am a lowly constellation, and thus...”.

“Constellation?”.

“Not as you know them. I am Cancer, not the disease, no, but the constellation. Call me Karkinos if you like, or Carcinus. But, anyways, the stars that you lowly Earth children recognize as me are in fact parts of one of my claws. It was ripped off by Leben ages ago. I escaped, because it was weaker back then, but now its power is nearly that like when it first challenged God. Now I fear it will consume my body just as it is going to consume your angel friend, a rather amiable fellow if I remember it right. Return to my shell, the great crab, and Leben will take both my body and

soul. That is why I am here. But you are a child of life, you don't belong here, and Leben only really wants your soul..."

"I already got my soul back. I escaped Leben's mind-realm".

"All the better! I suppose then I should free you, perhaps in return you can grant me a favor..."

"What would that be?"

"Rid existence of my body".

"Hmm?"

"Destroy it, consume it, whatever you wish. I just don't want all the energy inside going to Leben or its angels. It has a sweet tooth, that twisted old bird. The nectar, the blood, of a heavenly being, it's a fine delicacy beyond all other foods, one Leben craves. I sense you've tasted it too, albeit decayed. Perhaps you can taste it again, and deny our enemy a meal in the process".

"Sounds... excellent. Where can I find your body?"

"The northern celestial hemisphere, but that information is of little use to you. I can tear a small hole in the darkness for you, open up a gate much like the one that took you here. You'll find yourself right upon my body. Do what you want from there, I suppose I have no say once you're free".

There was a rippling sensation, and suddenly a great crack appeared in the void, tearing like fabric and rippling with golden light. For a second, Obaddon thought he could glimpse the faint outline of a massive claw retreating back into the darkness.

"Go now", rumbled Cancer's omnipresent voice. "But I must warn you, I left my body with some... basic instinct... to defend itself. You see, it still lives and moves and breathes. To sustain itself it consumes stars and nebulae, acting essentially as a one-crab cosmic cleanup crew. It will also fight back if approached... but don't worry. It's quite stupid. I believe you'll be able to find a way to make it turn on itself, and then you'll be treated to a banquet of a lifetime!"

With that, Obaddion passed through the gate and out of one abyss and into another.

#

Of the dust of suns and flesh of God!

In flame we dance!

And when we dance we feed... we birth ourselves anew in light...

Fire! Light! Life! Light!

We are light... life... holy... every second we are reborn in flame...

And we dance to celebrate it all...

...we dance in the pain and violence of birth... the destruction of creation!

From life comes death and death comes life! All dust molded from the light of the stars!

We are the dust of dreams and the light of life!

Fire! Light! Life! Light!

We dance in blood and pain and birth it into pleasure!

And when we dance...

We'll dance with you... and birth you anew in our light!

“The best part of existing in the mind is that I know the truth. People say one thing but think another, everyone lies and hides their truths, their emotions. You believe the petty creature you are fighting to defend is your friend, yes? That he cares about you, just as you care about him, or so you believe. Do you want to know what he really thinks?”

Leben's voice trilled through the air, an afterthought as Prophet focused on swinging its cross in great, sweeping arcs, driving the points deep into the white hides of the Seraphim and releasing scarlet blood and golden nectar. One knocked aside with a blow to the head, another stabbed through the abdomen. A third tackled and crippled, wings broken with a few well-aimed strikes. Again and again they were struck down, only to reform themselves and rise up again, and Prophet found that their numbers and unrelenting savagery made them difficult foes. It had not gotten

another chance to finish one off, always having to turn to another immediately after downing the first.

It was mid-afternoon, and Prophet was exhausted. The fight had begun at dawn.

“There is not a soul in all of creation that truly cares for you”, cackled Leben’s voice. “For all your strength, all your wisdom, you can’t find anyone willing to accept you, and the miserable reptile you call your friend is just as repulsed by you as anyone else! I call you an angel, you see yourself as one, but deep down we both know you don’t even have that! You’re just a bastard, the filthy bastard offspring of a demon and some hideous alien ape!”.

Demon.

Devil.

Monster.

Kill it with fire! Drive it away!

I was never wanted. Never loved. Always a monster, always an “it”. They hated me from the day I was born, and I hated myself. For three million years I’ve been forced to be this awful creature in this awful body, alone even when in company...

Don’t think like that! You’re letting it get to you!

That’s what Leben does after all...

It preys on your fears, your hatred, your insecurities. Attacking you at your weakest, making you think its yourself, making you take the blame. Even if I can’t fight off these bloody birds, I can at least resist the voice...

“Can you? Maybe now, but when they start to eat you alive? Will you still be willing to praise God then, trust in He who abandoned you to such a horrible fate, to such pain? What has your God done for you? Where has He been all this time? I’ve been eating the souls of His creations, torturing them. Why hasn’t He stopped me? Is He even real? Perhaps He is, and He’s just a cruel, ignorant being with no care for you, just like everyone else!”.

Prophet bellowed angrily and snapped a Seraphim's jaws, quickly retrieving its cross to swat away another. One barreled into it from behind, ripping at its wings with teeth sharp and jagged like shards of broken glass. The attacker was thrown down and stomped underfoot, but by then two more had dug their talons into its arms and were biting at its face. Prophet roared and screamed, flailing this way and that and viciously swinging its great cross. Its foes were cut and stabbed like kebab meat, crumpling under the dark form of their enraged adversary.

But the Seraphim never died. The Seraphim never tired. They just kept coming...

*We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!
We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!
We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!
Come with us, be free! Be holy!*

#

Obaddion was hit with a memory of looking for crabs by the beach, lifting up rocks to reveal a scuttling horde, wading in the shallows and snatching up those that fled from his feet as they kicked up mud and sand. Delicious crabs.

But this crab was far larger.

In form it looked to be like those giant deep-sea spider crabs on the nature documentaries: pale in color, small in body but with vast, spindly limbs that moved this way and that, slowly clawing at the void, funneling cosmic matter into a lazy maw, tugging at reality with the sheer absurdity of its existence. Only this crustacean was perhaps the size of a galaxy, a moon, a planet...

He couldn't be sure of the size because the great crab was constantly morphing and shifting in his eyes, creating tunnel vision that made it seem as large as the universe itself for an instant, then reverting back to the size of a small moon. Such was the body of the being that called itself Cancer and spoke in the darkness.

It glowed with cosmic light, stars twinkling across its body like biolights, energy flowing through its being like blue flame. When Cancer opened its mouth the flames would spout free, consuming anything before it besides the darkness itself.

#

The stagnant motions in the heavens may be directed again so rays of a past sun burn twice. There is no more taste to blood from the earth, the blood of mortals, but there is light in the blood of that which is divine. When one hungers for flesh, angels may suffice.

I've hungered for the nectar since I first tasted it back in the womb, back with Leben, though I suppose Leben has always been with me in a sense.

I smelled it in Leben and I smelled it in Prophet and resist the urges as I might, I *craved* them. I hungered for them, for that sweet, delicious sap, the honey of a cosmic hive. The aftertaste is bitter but it's so sweet at first, like tasting stars...

Cancer smells of it too.

It's been awhile since I've eaten...

#

"Each of my Seraphim is like a god", spoke the voice of Leben as Prophet tore one in half, flinging the carcass into the quiet waters of the nearby sea. The Seraphim soon began to reassemble itself, and before Prophet could destroy its heart two more began biting its arms and clawing at its flanks. "The light from their halos, at its strongest intensity, can shatter entire planets. Their talons can tear open reality itself, and their wings can carry them anywhere in a mere instant. They are clothed in the pale light of moons, fueled with stars, and the force of their being crashes against the soul like the waves of the most furious sea".

Why don't they use all those ridiculous powers then, hmm? Why not kill me here and now? Look, I've just ripped one's head off. Not to mention I killed two already.

Prophet bellowed and tossed the decapitated skull aside, stomping on the body while it grappled with the greedy teeth of another. A blow from the cross rewarded it with a spray of blood and a nonexistent respite, for in an instant a Seraphim was trying to tear at its wings. A second bit its ankles, and a third snapped at its face.

“Because you’re so much fun! I sacrificed a couple because those small victories created hope. Two down, five to go! Your spirit will be all the weaker, for since I’ve created hope it will make despair and defeat all the more crushing, your faith all the more wavering. Those remaining five will just keep coming, my Seraphim never tire, they’re fueled by the suns inside them, hearted with stars, and they eat only for pleasure. But you, my funky monkey, you have been fighting all day! And when the lonely old sun of this world sets you will breathe your last!”.

Damn you!

“Weren’t you opposed to cursing! It’s so easy to maintain morals when everything goes well, when life is finally working right, but when things get hard and existence pulls back the curtains and shows how cruel it really is, well, everyone reverts to their innate tendencies for cruelty and anger and self-serving flesh desires! You spoke kindly before because you had hope and weren’t in enough pain to reject your morals, but morals are so cheap and disposable! You saved that lizard, but for what? Obaddion’s already out of the darkness. It’s only a matter of time before he breaks back into reality, into physical existence, and then he’ll return to the one place he knew, following those memories... you know what... who... he’ll find. I lied, you lied, but the truth will reveal itself when he sees that those cities are still occupied, that humanity still exists! And though he’s convinced himself that hurting them was wrong and that his only true enemies were his creators, as soon as he sees them and they start firing their guns he’ll be reminded of how much he hates them! Just as you’ll soon be reminded of how little God’s done for you, how He hasn’t given a single thought as to your existence since the day you were born!”.

Shut up!

“You devil-shaped mockery of man! You’ll taste delicious served on a cross!”.

Prophet screamed into the setting sun, red against the ivory of cannibal angels, red upon the sea, red upon the horned titan and stony ruins.

It leapt up with a trumpeting bellow, cross poised to strike down an incoming Seraphim. The angel screamed and lowered its head, halo whirring and wheels blazing for a mere instant before it emitted a blast of blinding, searing light, pummeling Prophet against the ruins, scorching its already blackened skin. Tattered wings fluttered against the fiery heat like a torn cape, ebony cross fell from weakened hands.

We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!

We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!

We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!

Come with us, be free! Be holy!

Prophet roared and forced itself to stand, grabbing the cross and using it as a shield against the light. To no avail, as all five Seraphim circled it in the skies, heads lowered as their halos shot forth the terrible light circulating by blazing wheels and eyes, holy light once but pain in current. Their victim flailed about, blind and exhausted, and in no time at all they dove down and began to tear at its flesh.

#

“God... why do you abandon me?”.

Oh please! You knew you were going to die, that you had to sacrifice yourself for your friend. You knew the Seraphim would taste your flesh.

“But why must I do this in the first place? Why must everything hurt?”.

Because it is the purpose you made for yourself.

Pain and teeth everywhere, fluttering wings and cruel jaws. Prophet screamed and groaned, all deep and low as it disappeared beneath the

massive bodies of the Seraphim. Its cross was snatched from its hand, its wings were being ripped to shreds.

It seemed that every time it completed an instar and achieved such a form it was all taken away, initial power ending in failure, such bitter failure at that. Some of the Seraphim left it, taking to the skies and circling there as Prophet collapsed to its knees.

Tired, so very tired. The sky was salmon and amber as it was at dawn, its sun was sinking down to sleep. Why couldn't death be peaceful, sitting against the rocks of its birth-world and watching the skies? Why did flesh bring pain?

One of the Seraphim swooped down and grabbed it by the horns, dragging it along the dusty, lichen-coated ground. Prophet groaned and resisted weakly, robbed of its strength. Another, unknown to its intended victim, had flown behind and stuck the cross in the ground, angled towards its back, vicious point eager to claim more life.

Prophet felt the blade of its cross pierce through its spine and into its stomach and screamed. The Seraphim released it, hovering in the air as it collapsed, drooped over its greatest weapon, black against the red sun. Like ash against fire, fire fading into charred nothing.

Feed, brothers and sisters, children of God reborn in the hallow womb!

Sate your glut on that which is holy!

The Seraphim swooped down in unison, beautiful in their sounding like harps, humming like a choir beyond any other, but feeding grotesquely like vultures. Wings flapped this way and that, ivory hides soon splattered with scarlet stains. The greedy teeth sunk into hapless flesh, jaws burrowed deep in the lacerated abdomen.

Holy, holy, holy!

Prophet groaned and sputtered blood, weakly swatting at them with its clawed hands to no effect. One Seraphim tore out its kidneys while another two fought over its intestines, yanking them out with sharp tugs,

tearing the skin like wrapping paper. One landed on top of it all, its weight driving Prophet further down the cross.

Come with us, be free!

Let us take you and feast, gorge on supple flesh!

Free yourself from mortal shackles, join us in divine light!

Meat is dirty, meat is stained!

Tear yourself free of it and join us, become one, become holy!

All alone, without sorrow, without care. The ultimatum of a three million year struggle culminated on the cross, in the teeth of cannibal angels made by a cruel imitator of God. No one mourned, no one even knew it existed. There was not a care in the world that a horned titan was being eaten alive, dying slowly under an alien sun. If only someone cared...

Holy, holy, holy!

One of the Seraphim began to bite at Prophet's heart.

"Have I done... the right thing? Have I done well?"

Prophet clung to the idea that there was at least One who cared, One who wanted it.

Devil.

Demon.

Monster.

It was never wanted in this world. It never belonged. Too big, too strong, too different.

Perhaps it would be different in the next.

I killed so many. Destroyed so much. I can't erase who I was, what I've done, no matter how hard I try. Perhaps I deserve this, baptized in tooth and claw...

The Seraphim shrieked and clattered, reveling in their feast as they soaked in the vast streams of blood, gulping down angelic nectar and aged organs alike. A holy feast.

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!
Holy, holy, holy!
“Forgive... me!”.
Holy, holy, holy!
Holy, holy, holy!
Holy, holy, holy!

A voice spoke, like a father. It was neither Prophet nor Seraphim, nor Leben. Yet Prophet recognized it at once, the voice it had been wanting to hear its whole life, speaking the words it had craved even before it turned from being a monster:

“You have done well, my good and faithful servant”.

Chapter Eighteen

Upon The Cross

Cancer had spotted the dinosaurian form drifting before its tiny eyes and bristled with dread. The creature was a flesh-form and small in size, but it bore the blood and being of world eaters, of angels, of old ones. With the power of the stars the great constellation swerved to meet this new foe.

Obaddon salivated with half-starved anticipation, teeth wanting flesh and tongue wanting blood so sickly-sweet. There was a feast before him, and he dodged past the mile-wide incoming mass of a great glowing claw and struck the edges, ripping through flaming matter, embracing existence but distant from it all the same. He was in space but didn't worry for lack of air, he was without ground to walk upon but cared not, for his body was gone and he was merely a soul, ascended unnaturally to the level of old ones, those vast things shambling in the darkness just outside human perception. They were delicious.

Again came a claw, groaning as it opened and snapped shut, and he swerved away just in time and ruptured the neon carapace, releasing clouds of golden light that disappeared into an eager maw.

When one hungers for flesh, angels may suffice.

Slithering through the skies in great arcs, bending and turning with a freedom unlike any before. He could move, swimming like he did once in lake and sea, without any weight save that which he needed to remind himself he existed. He could move and swim and do things like never before, free, free! With an ecstatic roar he dove down to the very center of Cancer, the rounded body circled with those vast limbs clawing at stars, at Heaven, existing in one way but not another. There were the noises of stars birthing and dying, glass splitting as Obaddon smashed into the translucent shell, fracturing it as he scraped with his claws and gnawed

with his teeth. Rippling before his eyes was the sacred nectar, just out of reach, and he salivated wildly with no thought save his desire for the taste, just a taste, and then some.

One of the great claws came down to crush him and he slithered out of reach, drifting off as the point ruptured its own body, splattering a dazzling river of blue and gold and translucent blood, flame that cooled upon the tongue, and he bore down on it and feasted again.

Cancer screamed with the energy of that which it consumed, the blood of stars, its being. Obaddion was burrowing inside it, eating it from the inside out and smashing its carpace. Again and again it struck itself, trying to dig out the creature within, and with each blow more stars were spirited to freedom, more and more until the vast constellation became but a pale, hollow shell, sinking away into nothing.

Obaddion burst from its drained face, splitting the eye like an egg as he clawed to freedom and chased after the departing nectar, eating it all, swelling and growing as he was filled with the ambroisa of angels and the heat of stars.

His teeth tore at it like it was meat but he consumed it as if it were liquid, funneling it down into his being, glowing at first in places, but the glow faded at his shadow of flesh overcame it and channeled it into his form. He had forgotten about Prophet, humanity, Leben, all but his insatiable hunger, no longer for physical food but for something much better, the wisdom of stars and nebulae and all the Heavens, the energy of things not meant for a scab-ridden arena monster, things he tasted nonetheless.

There was a splitting sound, and reality cracked open and fell aside as five forms of light with three pairs of wings and halos of ivory flame burst into being anew. Between the movements of their wings they looked like human forms but these soon reverted to that of their master, faces screaming and necks straining as their skulls ripped free of flesh and grew

long with weathered crests and many teeth, arms and legs dissolving and reappearing as cruel talons, six wings turning into two.

The Seraphim.

Again, Obaddion was reminded of everything that happened before and what he needed to do now.

Prophet.

There had been seven before, now five... but what had become of his protector?

Obaddion knew the answer but decided to search for it anyway.

Always remember, open your eyes.

He thought of red waters and red suns and crumbling stone, waiting, a tragic goodbye, and the gate opened up like a door, glowing at the edges so as to distinguish it from nothing, diving through just in time as the Seraphim began to devour Cancer's fractured remains.

#

Back.

Back on a rock, under a sky. Waves lapped gently against an alkaline shore. Ruins crumbled softly in the distance.

The sun of that world had risen once more since Obaddion had last seen Prophet, and now it was beginning to set. He drifted down, setting his feet upon the dusty ground as if he were walking underwater on the bottom of a pool. There was a memory of chasing fish in the lakes, back before he dissolved. His feet connected, and he began to walk.

He didn't want to.

He didn't want to go there.

He didn't want to keep going at all, not for anything save the infernal hunger that was consuming him, that for the nectar, the blood, of angels.

Yet he needed closure all the same. Perhaps Prophet, so unluckily endowed with that demonic form, was still alive. Perhaps it had escaped. Hard as it was, he resisted such thinking. Experience had taught him such hopefulness rarely proved true.

There was nothing save the soothing sound of the waves, the crumble of dirt and rock under his feet. Obaddon was happy for it, even with all the dread in the air. He had spent so long cowering in the cell, shielding his eyes from the bright lies, covering his ears to escape the terrifying machine-noises of human creation. Lights would form and pass against the walls, vehicles groaned and roared like monsters unto themselves. It had been worst the first few days, when he had been more of an animal. As he grew older it just became lonely, background noise that was both familiar and ugly.

The taste of blood was still in his mouth, lingering, but it wasn't bitter this time. It was burning bright, like eating fire, sweet like honey and fiery like stars, but cool like ice all the same. Cancer had been delicious, and to think what his younger self in the cell would've thought if he was told he would be eating constellations.

All that power, all that strength. He had felt stronger, physically at least, after tasting the Archangel, and he felt infinitely stronger now. But still so weak, too weak to save his friend, too weak to resist himself.

#

Jesus died on a cross to forgive humanity for their sins. His blood atoned for what they did to me, what they did to each other, so long as they repented. I suppose I'm subject to the same rules if the creatures I've seen really are angels and not just cosmic horrors masquerading under the name. It's an awful burden, seeing as I was made to be evil, to be a villain.

The question is, what has Prophet died for?

I've found myself in the valley where we were last together, where it looked me in eye and asked for forgiveness, as if a being so infinitely more kind and good-hearted than I needed to do so. It fills me with shame. I don't deserve it. I don't deserve to have someone, anyone care for me. I don't deserve for someone to be nice to me, let alone lay down their life and give themselves up to death. What brutal death at that!

Like he whom it put faith in, Prophet has been crucified. There's a massive, obsidian cross in the center of the valley. It's dark, roughly hewn with pointed tips. My former protector hangs from it limply, head low, arms bloodied with the spikes binding them to their posts. Its abdomen is hollow, the skin at the edges ripped like paper. Those awful birds... angels... I don't really know what they are... they really did eat it alive. From the inside out. There's nothing but dried blood now, bits of viscera piled on the floor.

Eaten alive...

Eaten alive!

Damn it God, if this is the fate you have for your angels, what do you have in store for me!? Don't you care? Didn't you look down from your throne and see your servant bleed and die, probably revering you until the very end?

Where are you!? Have you once given a single thought as to what you've made? Why are we given minds that aspire for greatness, for peace, for comfort, only to be relegated to bitterness and despair!? Why are we given eyes that look for beauty and forced to stare at monsters of flesh, the corpses of those we hold dear!? Where is your goodness?

Will you ever answer me!? Will you even acknowledge that I exist!?

ANSWER ME!!!

You killed me twice and you killed my friend, the only creature that ever looked and saw anything in me besides a monster! You killed everything I loved, ripping me from the places I knew and the body I knew and the people I knew and putting me in *this*! This horrible, ugly beast! I never asked to be made a monster! I never asked to be made into a hideous, awful thing that hates everyone, that's mad all the time, that doesn't belong anywhere or with anyone! I didn't ask to vomit my own blood and lay in my shit for months on end, taken from the one place where I felt as if I belonged, where I was *happy*! I don't know who I was before but I couldn't take it! I couldn't take it then so I tried to escape, I

tried to enter a fantasy, but the fantasy proved even worse and now I'm Obaddion, a hideous monster, and it's all my own fault but it's also yours for making me so pathetic, so stupid, and life so awful that it's something I wanted to escape from in the first place! I don't really know what I am now and I don't know who I was to begin with! I don't know why I'm here and why everything hurts and why I'm always mad! I'm tired of being angry and confused and running and fighting, I just want to go back to nothing! I don't want to live and I don't want to die. I don't want to exist either because no one acknowledges I exist, and when I do they hate me!

I'm a sick, pretentious piece of rotting meat and I hate myself for it. I hate you for making me that way too. Why can't your creations have better?

Answer me! Answer me with your wheels of fire and eyes, answer me with your blinding light and booming voice, all the miracles I've heard so much about! Send down your angels to fight me, I doubt you'll care if I eat a few. They're delicious after all! Send them down, send them all, so I can go to Hell already for recognizing how cruel you really are!

You can turn rocks into water and a couple of fish and loaves of bread into twelve baskets full of leftovers, but you can't turn me into something that isn't this abomination, that isn't Obaddion, that can live good and think good and be how you want me to be. You can resurrect the dead but you couldn't save my friend from getting eaten alive!

Prophet was stronger than you, infinitely so, for it cared enough to lay down its own life for creatures far lesser than itself. It acknowledged I exist, it suffered so I could be free and I'm awful, I don't deserve it! Yet Prophet did it all the same, acting with love even though you made it to look as the very prince of hate! I can't stand that it did it because I'm horrible, and I can't stand myself. It didn't deserve to die like that. But I do.

Kill me, o' great and mighty God. Third time's the charm, thrice will the serpent Obaddion be slain and no more! Aye, will ye cometh down and smite he whom accuses you so? You gave me life, but I don't like it. Take it away, I don't want to keep it.

I don't want to keep waking up and knowing I'm *me*, knowing all the things I've done, knowing that I'm hated. I don't want to keep dragging myself onwards in pursuit of hollow joys, food and sleep and then some more, though perhaps half the time I've forced myself to live through pure spite.

I have nobody... I don't think I can end myself on my own. I'm just a dream.

But life is just a dream after all. Please wake me up.

Prophet's still looking me in the eye. That mask of a face is dull and scarred, horned head held low. The halo is gone, the wings are torn into nothing. In place of the tear I last saw there's a trickle of blood.

I can't face it. It's condemning me, silently, for defying what it stood for, what it died for. Prophet wanted me to live. Prophet wanted me to find what it did, make my own reality.

Prophet sacrificed itself not out of sheer heroism but so I could learn to love, not to will me into cruel existence but so I could find happiness, try and fix myself, try and be better. Prophet wanted to help me, and it had to end its own life hoping I could make a good one for myself.

Maybe I don't understand God, or maybe Prophet doesn't understand God.

Perhaps through challenging God I come to understand him more... or perhaps it's just sinking me deeper into the same Hell...

I don't know. I don't really know anything anymore, not since I left my body and entered a world I don't understand. Either way, Prophet wanted me to live, grow to see myself as who I am and not what the world made me to be. Perhaps I should honor that wish...

Always remember, open your eyes.

Not everyone is awful. As much as I hate them, as much as I want to, I can't judge humanity by what some have done to me. God is cruel but he is in charge, if I can correctly infer so from the existence of angels.

There are souls in the Archangels, human souls, angel souls, beings that don't belong trapped in those rotting corpse-shells. Tortured, agonized existences, dragging others down to their pain, just like Leben, just like me...

I can't change what... who I am. I can't erase what I've done, dissipate my rage, erase my nature, which is that of a monster. But I can use it. I can use it to hunt down every last one of those blood-shitting walking corpses called angels and rip out their brains until Leben is left with no souls but its own. I can use it to travel through the abyss and the stars and kill anything in my way, not stopping until the final Archangel falls apart and its victims are freed.

There's no fighting reality and there's no fighting God. My only hope is to try and redeem myself. But I don't deserve it. I don't deserve paradise. I just hope I can free those who do...

Chapter Nineteen

Good Music

I learned how to play music today.

That is, if today is in fact a day and will lead to night and other such normal things, if the things I knew in life are the same here.

I am on the Second Plane of Existence.

There are seven in total, seven like the seven Archangels, seven Seraphim, seven days of the week, seven days of creation. But rarely are things so simple, and the seven days of creation are in fact millenia of molten rock, worms becoming fish and fish becoming frogs, angels falling and reforming as demons.

Life as I, a creature of lowly flesh, know it, well, it ends when you take your last breath and become food for the worms. I was worm-food even before I stopped breathing, stopped bleeding. Perhaps that is because I died far earlier than I was buried, when I learned what I was and what the world made me to be. When my soul learned that it couldn't escape the cell and the mocking crowd and the shits and flies and bleeding wounds.

But life doesn't really end with the death of meat. The part of you that really matters, your soul, all that was shaped and seen during your time as a child of the dust, it keeps going, transcending the shell of rock and flesh and moving into worlds one can only dream of.

There are stars and that is what meat sees, move beyond that and they form a crab. Seen once as constellations, as a true being in lives to come.

Before there were rocks and suns and flesh there was darkness and things beyond physical boundaries. The higher sentients, the old ones, without bodies to be seen by human eyes, voices to be heard by human ears, but there all the same, lingering just outside the firelight like savage wild things, moths hovering just outside the warmth of the flames. The

smaller ones, the more grounded ones, they tried to make themselves flesh by eating stars and souls but still they couldn't be seen, at least not well...

I've seen them though. I've seen angels and demons and they're both the same, the same thing, just as all sharks are fish but not all fish are sharks. I've seen them and tasted them and talked with them yet I'm but a mortal being. At least I was.

There's rules but I've broken them. I don't need to breathe but there isn't air here anyway. I was sent to the outer darkness, perhaps for my safety, and I escaped. I was born flesh and I escaped. Then I thought I came back...

I didn't really come back. When Prophet killed the Archangel and we tasted its souls, we escaped through a gate it had cut in reality. We escaped the mind realm but not Leben, because as long as there are minds there is Leben. When we first got out we glided through the heavens, touching stars but not too close, and then Prophet took me to the world where it was born.

Turns out it's no longer a physical place. It's a memory. The land and sea's all wrong, the buildings don't make sense. It's abstract because that world is gone, at least to us. It is a rock and rocks are for things of rock, rock and dust, dust and flesh. We may have escaped the mind realm but we were still just souls, souls pretending to have bodies, dancing between the physical and metaphysical. The things I saw and the ground I walked upon were merely Prophet's last memories of the place, projected onto my reality.

Everything here now is dreams and memories and desires, projected by minds, made into being. In places the ground is red, crumbling archways float in the air forming passageways without roads, without feet to walk them. There's fire and screams but no bodies burn. Perhaps these are the thoughts of those who saw war, dancing before my eyes as if there, sensed by my nerves but neither really exist.

I don't understand it, not really. As I've said before, I need new eyes.

This is a place for cosmic things but I am a lowly worm. I don't belong, this is alien to me, even more alien than the world of man, before I realized I had lived there before.

Voices but not mine. Some are terrible, like the Seraphim. I hear their chorus, fervent vigor as teeth bite flesh and taste blood, the same blood for which I hunger, the blood I shared with creatures like Prophet and Cancer, creatures I've consumed.

I'm awful. I couldn't help it. Prophet still smelled of blood, of the nectar, and it overcame me. I couldn't help but taste it... just a taste... all I wanted... and then I devoured the corpse of the very creature who died to save me, eating it like the dirty fucking animal I am...

I'm awful.

There's music though, and that is good. Once I needed headphones, running to the sounds I liked, cutting out the voices. Now I just will it, and it's there. I don't know how, nor do I have perfect mastery over it, but it happens. I think of songs and they play, just for me, just for me... They cut out the voices, the Seraphim's cackles and screams, human screams...

I still see them...

I see happy people and I'm disgusted, hateful, because their skin is clean and without scars. Their clothes are nice, they never had to sleep in their own blood and piss. They have families, caring families, families who didn't send them away to be made into a monster. They pile in their cars and head to a stadium, buy tickets and food and sit in the stands. A child brings their stuffed animal, it's an Obaddion. They're so excited to see the real deal, the monster they always watched on the television in the flesh at last. There's music and announcements and advertisements on a big screen and then the gates open in the arena below. Out comes Atrox and me, but it could very well just be two of many clones. They fight... I remember that fight...

No...

Atrox starts beating Obaddion... me... against the electric wall. People are delighted at first but then they start to scream, screaming because the wall fails, because the monsters are free. The child clutches their stuffed Obaddion as the real one stumbles to his feet, as he looks to his fellow beast and nods. But he doesn't know that he's closer to them than to the other monster, so close... almost... the same. Then he screams and rips the child's parents in half, turning on the child next...

No. No! NO!

Over and over and over again I hear the screams and I see myself killing, killing them, killing a child who adored me, hurting people who loved me, eating Prophet's corpse, running from my family, hating them...

Dear God, I'm a monster.

It's not just the body they put me in that made me a monster. I created it after all, a fantasy, and they made that fantasy into real flesh. It's not that, not that at all. If anything, this monstrous form is just a reflection in the mirror. I saw myself as a monster before I really became one, before I entered Obaddion and united with it. I didn't like people and I didn't like the world and they didn't like me back, so I identified with the monsters on television, creatures who seemed to be cursed with the same tragic existence as I.

I guess it was the negative experiences early on that led me to lose my expected siblinghood with my species. People never really were close to me, nice to me. I was alone, and they were distant, frightening creatures who I did not understand and, at surface level, shared little with. So I gradually distanced myself from them, never growing closer but allowing each blow they struck to drive me farther away until I hated them and, as a byproduct, hated myself too because I knew how they saw me. Eventually I couldn't take it anymore, among other things. Eventually I tried to escape the only way I could.

Now I'm here, and Prophet's gone, maybe not dead (in the spiritual sense) but out of my life. Not as if I'm really alive to begin with. I'm not even that real, just a thought, a passenger, a traveler through the unified dream.

It's lonely.

At least I have good music. The sounds of a piano are lovely against the backdrop of red skies and crumbling architecture.

#

"Do you know where we are?"

The voice was Leben's, it couldn't be anything but. Obaddion had sealed its name within his mind since he first heard it, first fell victim to the words sliding off that silky smooth tongue. They were in a kitchen sitting on opposite ends of a small, wooden table that was situated right beside the window, which was covered with semi-translucent pieces of cloth that may actually have been skin. The surrounding area was a shadowy red, but above the table hovered a amber light not unlike the "stars" of the mind realm.

"Dear God, leave me alone already..."

"Do you know where we are?"

"I don't know where I've been since one of your pregnancy-metaphor space whales ate my soul and shit me out in some trippy bootleg Hell".

"Someone has a temper..."

"Of course I do, I'm a giant fucking monster!"

"Do you *want* to know where we are?"

"Sure". He pulled back his lips in a wolfish snarl.

"You ate lunch here for years. And breakfast. And dinner".

"Again with the memories? I never remembered it being... like this".

Obaddion brushed aside the stringy scarlet tissue and congealed blood on the table before him, watching it plop on the rusted laminate. Everything was still, and quiet. Dark like night but with the gentle warmth

of a sunny afternoon, little particles dancing in the red light that snuck through the window.

“I can’t recreate everything perfectly. But while we’re here, let’s eat”.

“What makes you think I’m going to have lunch with you?”.

“You don’t seem like a picky eater to me. You ate your friend’s corpse after all”.

Obaddion sat silent.

“How did demon-Jesus taste? Was it delicious? I sure thought so”.

Obaddion noticed the wallpaper bore visuals of angels... and crosses. The little light sounded a noise like chimes, quiet even in the intense stillness.

“Why so quiet? You’ve said it... thought it before. Why is it wrong for you to indulge in your nature? You were made to be a monster, so be one! Don’t tie yourself to human morals! The nectar is delicious, taste as much as you like”.

A halo decorated with glowing symbols like written fire appeared above Leben’s head and whirred, summoning up a bowl up from the sticky blood-mixture of the table. It glimmered like the cosmos, but if one looked closely it was red.

“Now you tell me to act like a monster, but you’ve spent so long reminding me of who I really am. Make up your mind!”. Obaddion swatted the bowl aside, ears perking up as it splashed against the floor.

“You can be human and still be a monster. Humans are perhaps the only true monsters, seeing as animals live innocently through instinct”.

Leben summoned the bowl anew and chuckled.

“I’m simply hurt. I put all this work into harvesting angel fluids and you don’t want a single taste. I just want to have a nice lunch with my dearest friend”.

“Oh, I’m sorry”, hissed Obaddion. “We can have lunch together, and next we’ll cosplay as mech pilots from the sparkle force or whatever it’s called and have a sleepover”,

“A tempting offer”.

“Fuck you”.

“Why do you keep resisting me? When you were alone in your cell, who noticed you? Who talked to you, recognizing your existence? Who gave you the power to escape and lay low the foundations of the world around you, the world of your tormentors?”.

“Something to do with the fact that you killed my friend and routinely put me through physical and mental torture”.

“Demon-Jesus? It wasn’t really your friend! Hah! And it’s not the good, perfect alien grandparent you think it is either! Everyone has their ugly side, every city has its slums. Do you want to know Prophet’s? Do you want to know how many it killed?”.

“Shut up! All you do is make me hate, make me angry. I have those feelings enough on my own, just leave me be...”.

“I can do more than just make you angry. We can become one, if you like. I can give you things you enjoy, pleasures, human things that you could never have. Don’t you just want to be loved after all? To have someone who cares for you? Someone who understands you? You can’t find that in people, we both know you’ve tried. You can’t find that in other monsters either. All you have is yourself... and me”.

“Do you have a poster of me in your bedroom or something? I kinda miss the demonic shrieking and soul-eating now”.

“Oh please! If I wasn’t taking this form and you weren’t so damn stubborn, you’d be all over me. You can’t deny your filthy ape desires, try as you might to distinguish yourself from them. Even now you’re so desperate for a purpose, so driven to give yourself meaning that you’ll pursue the one you hated people for giving you! You’ve always hated being an object of violence and destruction, made to fight and nothing

more, but instead of breaking past that you just trudge on stubbornly on this pathetic quest to kill my Archangels!”.

“I can’t help but be anything different than who I am, can I?”.

“True, and I know you’re just harnessing it to try and redeem yourself, even if we both know that you can’t change what you did, and you’ll have to answer for it in the end. Go ahead! I won’t stop you, no, perhaps I might even *help* you. It will be most entertaining to watch, and besides, at the end of it all you will have gained no more than you had when you started”.

“It’s not about gaining anything...”.

“What then? Are you trying to justify your flaws and shortcomings by proving you have worth... for you think all that matters to others is your strength? Are you trying to free *them*? You and I both know those memories, dancing on the periphery of your mind. Who were those who were with you in your dreams? Why did being inside the Archangel feel so familiar? Do you think doing this will bring your old life back? Do you think it will change things for the better? Child, the events happening now were set in motion before you were even born! Life’s a story, and we’re all just playing our little parts. You can’t fight that. But if it gets too hard, and you’re reminded of how pathetic you really are, you can always come back to *me*. You can always revert to misery and hatred because, in truth, it’s what’s driven you most of your life. Go ahead and hunt my Archangels! You’ll find you’ve developed a special sense for them, allowing you to track them down one by one. Something to do with your shared blood. I won’t stop you. But when you spiral back into one of your little depressions I’ll be waiting”.

#

The kitchen was gone and Obaddion awoke into a cold, frothing sea. For awhile he ragdolled and let the waves carry him, enveloping his body in a chill that was cold but not quite icy, rushing him across gravelly bottoms and blue voids, rollercoastering through the depths and hurling

him above the surface. It was nice in a sense, and he closed his eyes and left his senses to the chaotic waters, playing music for himself in the meantime.

Something fleshy bumped him, and he awoke with a start and flung himself out and up to the surface, suddenly violent after his prolonged placidity. He could have sworn it was a hand, sworn that when he briefly opened his eyes there was a pale face, like a child, but he was too busy in a desperate flight for shore to contemplate it further.

#

Dear God the waves have eyes!

I broke above the depths and screamed, just barely missing the hand grabbing my foot. The water here isn't right, the waves rise smooth and rounded like river stones, like gentle hills, and I hear voices. Crowds, children laughing, as if I were on some public beach.

But there's no one here except whatever's in the water, only ghosts. The waves though, they're looking at me, racing alongside me, crashing into my flanks. Something meaty touches my tail. Suns, first one then five. Nothing makes sense here, I'm riding the waves as they leap like fish, spewing froth like dragon fire. My claw cuts flesh moving below, something explodes like a swelled-up whale on the beach, and the waters turn red.

In a messy heap I reach the shore. It's grey and rocky in some places, pale in others. I see buildings in the distant, abstract shapes piled like bad art. Subjectively bad, I remind myself. Not going there, not if it's from the dream I think it is.

There's a smell...

Meat.

Seeing nothing better to do, I follow it. Behind me there's a bubbling, popping sound, and a corpse rises to the surface of the waters.

#

"This place is familiar to you, isn't it?

Obaddion couldn't help but nod. To get there he had traversed an old concrete roadway edged by brush and farms in some places and drainage ponds and housing developments in others, cracks in the sidewalk thick with grimy weeds. Beyond the mismatched architecture he could see trees and more trees.. It looked like his deepest dreams, the ones that felt real, even if it was a very strange sort of real.

Still better than utter nothingness, he reminded himself. He had been in the outer darkness for who-knows how long and only just been saved from becoming part of it himself. Now he could walk and breathe and other such things, even if only in a strange uncertainty between life and death.

"It's like my dreams".

"Yes. We have done our best to make it comfortable for you. It is important to have comfortable things. Very important".

The voice sounded like a bell and slithered out from rusted pipes leading into nothing. Obaddion could see the pipes but he couldn't fathom as to their point of origin. The whole place was off in that respect, he only saw what he was meant to see.

Something moved... and a slinking, wormish form slithered from the pipes, twisting and curling within itself until its iridescent bronze coils piled atop eachother like sphagheti. The streamlined head poked out, a smooth mouth without eyes.

"Why am I here?".

"There are some you care for".

"Of course. But who?".

Prophet?

"Someday you will remember their names".

Their?

"I barely know any names besides those of monsters".

"So you think. You're closer to the world than you know".

Obaddion said nothing, listening to the wind.

“Would you try and save them?”.

“They’re in trouble?”.

“Perhaps. Not the sort you’re thinking”.

“Wha... Who? I’m alone... now that Prophet’s...”.

You know it’s dead. Those Sera-whatsits left nothing but a husk... and you ate the rest.

“They are all you have now, besides yourself. What would you do to save them?”.

“Joining a K-Pop band is pretty much out of the question”.

The bronze beast laughed like a wind chime.

“You have strength enough for humor. Good. But it’s a way of coping all the same...”. The beast sighed this time like wind flowing over an open pipe.

“Could you explain where I am?”.

“No better than you can interpret it for yourself. It’s like teaching quantum physics to a parrot”. The beast casually scratched its iridescent flank against one of the pipes.

“So I take it I’m in a dream then? But not the kind you wake up from”.

“Essentially. Reality is a strange thing for a soul without a body to ground it. The result is best described as a dream”.

“Or an acid trip”.

Again, the beast laughed.

“Would you like me to help you?”.

“With what?”.

“With finding those you knew before”.

“I have a family?”.

“Not now. But there’s an older memory to them. They beat it out of you mostly, but perhaps we can rekindle it”.

“Why should we do this?”.

“Prophet told me to, a while back. It’s in your best interests”.

“So, would you like to try and save them?”.

“I suppose. But can I?”.

“They can be saved. But it will be long, and painful. And maybe you cannot save the entirety of them. And perhaps in the end you will find that you hate them. But nonetheless, you can save them”.

“How?”.

“You will have to start with your own dreams, which of late have grown rather... disturbing”.

“How do I get there?”

“I can take you there myself”.

“Why are you helping me?”.

“Because someday you will help me”.

Obaddon stared at the beast’s face, which, unsurprisingly, was unreadable.

“One more question”.

“Ask away”.

#

Leben had gathered up the sad, skeletal remains of its fallen Archangel and dragged them down into the very deepest recesses of its womb. Not that losing one was a problem, it could always just remake it, add more flesh, replace the consumed souls. There would be seven again in no time at all, but it remained to be seen whether Obaddon could actually finish one off on his own.

Meaty tendrils weaved through the hollow portions of the skull, raising it up and suspending it in midair. Likewise was conducted with the massive ribcage and malformed vertebrae, ensnared in a spider’s web of sticky flesh. Leben busied itself with fusing the skull back together with the dual necks, reapplying the thick, viscous fluid that coated the stringy flesh, pouring cerebral essence back into the hollow cavities of the skull.

The heart was rekindled with a few shocks and a vat of fresh blood, the ribs were tightened in their sockets. Intestines were bundled back up,

this time tighter. Some of the teeth were replaced with new ones, sharper ones, and the connective tissue binding the feet and one leg had to be replaced as well.

Tubes lubricated the body with blood, awakening the womb which groaned into life with a vast downpour of bile. It turned the blood bitter, but Leben could care little. Any who tasted the nectar of angels would be unable to resist it, even if it was tainted. That fool Obaddon couldn't even resist consuming his own friend after all.

Leben itself had tasted it through the Seraphim. They were bonded by blood, that substance both fiery and cool that was possessed by all higher beings, the blood of angels. Of course, other things could acquire it by consuming angels or... less savory methods. Prophet's unnatural birth, to name one. Leben's Seraphim had done very well in disposing of it, especially in how they left the corpse. They shared its talent for crushing minds and breaking souls, but Leben found it shared a greater closeness with the Archangels. For while the Seraphim were quite literally biblical Seraphim, simply those who had rejected their maker and joined Leben, forced to take its form in the process, the Archangels were beings made partly of itself. Appearance-wise they were far different, but that owed to their being framed of the remains of Leviathan and Behemoth. As far as the constitution of their flesh, their blood, their being, they were closer to Leben than anything else.

For this one it pumped extra lifeblood into the newly-formed brain, carefully binding it with slime-like connective tissue to the skull, where at once it began to spread nerves that slowly wound throughout the body, slithering between muscles and arteries like headless snakes.

Last was the addition of the souls that constituted its being, and as to that process there is no proper description. What can be said is that some were once angels of destruction, which could be found in some number in all the Archangels. But in this particular example there was an abundance, bonded to their gargantuan host so as to harness the unique curvature and

energy-reflecting and retaining properties of the skull. This new Archangel could capture the power of suns and emit them in a single beam, or perhaps create shockwaves with the very force of its being.

The tendrils and tubes slithered loose, lowering the suspended carcass down to the fleshy epithelial layer of Leben's innermost being. With sickening pops they retracted and disappeared into the oozing flesh. A halo formed above the Archangel's head, spinning once and disappearing with a flash.

You are of me, and I of you.

Our blood is shared.

Go now, my Archangel, daughter of Revelations.

You know what you must do.

So spoke the voice of Leben, and the Archangel came to life with an earth-shaking groan that gradually heightened into a roar, then a screech. It took one step, then two, and a gate appeared through which it passed unhesitantly.

#

"Atrox?"

Obaddion didn't even know why he asked, but to his surprise there came a reply.

"Mhm?"

Atrox was hunched over a massive, pale human corpse, making gurgling, spitting sounds as it fed. Thankfully the flesh didn't smell of the nectar he so craved, otherwise Obaddion himself would have stooped to eating it. Again, he remembered consuming Prophet's carcass. It wasn't him doing that, not his mind. Something else...

The corpse looked at him with an unblinking eye and a slight grin.

"What does it mean?"

"Everything! And nothing at all! But perhaps a bit on escapism and learning to love yourself with a healthy dose of pointless religious imagery. And big robots!"

“You can talk?”.

“Anything goes here”.

“Dreams are wack”.

“That they are”. Atrox lifted its head up and gulped down a bit of greyed intestines.

“How’d you get here?”.

“Through your memories”, clicked Atrox. “Memories of a past companion... associate... friend even. Maybe family. But you don’t remember their face, so their personality is represented by a form you do recognize... which seems to be me”.

“How do you know this?”.

“It’s merely a reflection of your own speculations. And bits from the minds of others”.

“Who were you?”.

“I have no better an answer than you would. But I think I was a girl, once”.

“I see”. Obaddion grimaced as Atrox’s barbed tongue wiped bits of viscera from her mouth. “What are we doing here?”.

“Dreaming. We don’t have bodies anymore, but our souls still exist in reality. They haven’t gone to a higher plane of existence yet, somewhere like Heaven. In a way we’re still alive, only physically dead. But without bodies to ground us in the physical realm and flesh-eyes to see a tangible world, we exist in this abstract in-between of memories and dreams. Did I tell you about the one I had where I was a heron trying to land on ceiling fans?”.

Obaddion was a bit baffled by the fact that the creature that had so mindlessly savaged him years before was now speaking perfectly, albeit strangely.

“Would you like some?”. Atrox held up a bloody hand clutching a heap of viscera.

“No thanks”. He could hold out for angel blood.

Atrox clicked happily and shoved the chunk of flesh into her waiting maw.

“What exactly are those corpses?”.

“A reference! Or drowning victims. I’m not sure”.

“Do you know how to get out of here?”.

“Let your thoughts carry you. They’ll take you where you need to go”.

“Nothing makes sense here”.

“Does it need to?”.

Everything faded after that, but not in a recognizable way, and the question was the last thing Obaddion remembered upon waking up in a different world. Atrox was gone and so were the corpses and their stench.

Good.

He was in a much nicer place now, slick basalt rock and jumbled talus, green in many locales with lush moss and ferns. Little streams ran in the lower places.

It was silent, with dull, overcast skies and a light, gentle rain. He walked slowly, at times pushing himself off to float, almost as if he were swimming along the bottom of an unseen lake. There was a memory of being a better swimmer than his friends, but he couldn’t remember who they were. However, he could recall having a fondness for water even then, one that usually manifested itself in lengthy showers.

His skin trembled, the blood underneath began pulsing and oozing with sudden vigor.

My Archangel senses are tingling...

Heh heh...

Obaddion could feel it passing through the fabric of reality, bending physics to its will, forcing its image into his mind. He could feel the agony and desperation of its souls, the wrath of fallen angels, the cries of mortals. He could almost hear the low rumbling and creaking that accompanied its movements, the terrible splitting sound as it tore open another gate.

It was still far away. When indulging in anthropomorphization he would have called it a “she”, but Obaddion supposed it possessed souls of both genders, and those souls were what constituted its being after all. Either way, he had some time before the Archangel, which had announced it wanted him, arrived.

Upon arriving at the place he had noticed a very large, deep pit opening up from under a rocky overhang. There were rivers that flowed into it, cascading downwards as a series of brilliant waterfalls. He found himself slinking down into the humid depths, enjoying the flow of clear, clean water against his grimy face.

Obaddion sat amidst the waters and waited.

#

Stars screamed and aligned themselves unwillingly. The rumbling motions of the heavens were split and bound again, conscribed to new rules, and into reality at last broke the Archangel.

He had seen them before, many times, but there was always that dread, always those bad memories. They were, perhaps, more psychologically devastating than physically, seeing as they weren't really even physical entities in the first place. Metaphysics seemed to be the recurring excuse for the existence of virtually every being he encountered.

This time, however, there was no gate, no slow, creaking walk.

The Archangel simply nuked him from orbit.

It came first as a blazing ring of light in the sky, spreading as if it were an explosion. Like fireworks, and he had thought of the 4th of July and the incessant barking from all the terrified dogs as the skies split above. But here he was alone, and almost convinced he heard a choir chanting hallelujah as the halo spread and then condensed into a beam so powerful it was nearly solid. The violent column of light was glimpsed for but an instant before it slammed into his dream and fractured it, consuming everything in a raging, burning flame.

When his eyes grew back, Obaddion found himself watching the Archangel levitating in the red skies above, legs drooping down loosely, as if it were a rotting corpse left to hang. The destructive light reformed itself as a halo above the Archangel's head, and there almost seemed to be a smile upon the toothy mouth.

Sadistic bitch...

Obaddion's dreamskin bubbled and churned just like back in the city, flesh climbing anew over bleached bones and blackened scar tissue. His face was a boiled skull, cracked across the center, and he screamed as connective tissues bound it back together, skin and scales growing up from the paled protein and hardening into a darkish epidermis.

There was a slight tremor as the Archangel descended to the ground, which was now a red wastescape and nonexistent in places. His peaceable dream had been ripped open and fashioned into a nightmare, mutilated by way of divine light and sacred carrion. He forced himself to his feet, watching as muscle and hide crawled back over the bones of his hand, and looked to his opponent just in time to witness it lowering its head, and, by extension, the halo, which had begun to spin and blaze anew.

What followed can best be described like a series of successive shotgun blasts, fueled by stars aligned directly behind the Archangel, flowing through the grooves and hollows of its vast skull and channeling outwards, first as the dreaded halo, then condensing into a beam that hit him thrice with the heat of the suns. Again his flesh melted away, and he screamed in a fit of panicked desperation as he felt his arms, which had been lifted to shield his eyes, burn away into nothing. His eyes bubbled and disappeared with painful, sickening pops, the force of the blasts knocked him away soon after.

The ground beneath his feet fractured like an eggshell as the Archangel fired another blast, flinging him into the distance and sending his near-corpse of a body tumbling along the dusty ground. A scream reveberated across the landscape as his opponent drew closer, creaking and

groaning in tune with Obaddion's own cries of pain. He grew himself anew, courtesy of the angel blood, which he still did not truly understand, and rose to his feet with unsteady steps and a slurry of scarlet vomit.

Almost, if he could trust his ears, he could hear a chorus singing hallelujah again as the halo reformed above the angel's head, the light spreading until the entire being seemed to glow with it. The Devil manifested himself as an angel of light, and it would not be unwise to expect his demons to do the same. There was a deep tremor as the Archangel tensed itself against the ground, spewing bile before launching itself upwards and floating towards his direction. *Floating*, of all things. For such a massive entity it seemed impossible, but Obaddion had to remind himself that the Archangels weren't bound to any rules besides their own twisted forms.. It landed directly in front of him, skidding to a halt in a cloud of dust, and the toothy mouth almost seemed to smile as it unleashed a series of shockwaves that sent him tumbling back a ways. He faceplanted with a scream, but got himself together and dodged just in time as the Archangel levitated towards him once more.

Obaddion tried attacking it from the flank and found his face clamped between an immense set of jaws that immediately began to twist his neck and force him downwards. In actual life his neck would have broken, and at times his dream followed those rules, but here he managed to wrap around the bony cranium and kick his clawed feet into the brain. It splattered with blood, and a sweet smell hit his nose, like Leben's womb.

The smell of honey, and cinnamon. Warm blankets, sleep. Things he wanted.

He found himself in a screaming rage, arms bulging with muscle as they pried open the immense jaws and wrenched his head free. More blood, more of the overwhelming smell as he kicked away and skidded across the ground.

It was everywhere, the stench, and his Leben-borne innards bubbled with excitement. They were eager, he figured, for another feeding, another taste...

That was until he felt the blood hardening and pushing upwards, growing into points, tearing away his muscle and cutting through his skin. Not urged by his body, not willed by his mind. Something else was doing it, something else was in there, inside him. It was condensing and crystallizing under his hide, building up, solidifying and erupting as a series of scarlet, vertically-oriented points.

Obaddion convulsed into a fetal stance and screamed, throbbing as he felt the projections rise ever higher, absorbing his being to fuel their own growth. His eyes began to tear up...

Like a damn baby.

...and when he looked over his shoulder he saw crosses growing up out of his skin. Blood-red crosses, iridescent in the hellish light. They kept growing.

Not me...

Not mine...

The Archangel lowered its head, slavering pale maw curled suggestive of a twisted smile.

“You and I are bound together. Our blood is shared”.

Tendrils shot out from the toothy gullet and burrowed into his flesh, pumping it with spoiled blood. The crosses forced themselves up even higher, tearing loose strips of flesh that hung from their sides like sad tapestries.

“I... we... we will reform you into something nice... something holy...”.

Holy, holy, holy!

His eyes saw a psychedelic mess of crosses and stars... wheels... eyes... symbolism and patterns convulsing in an unholy dream, morphing and shifting and *talking*.

No!

More tendrils spewed from the Archangel's maw. The messy tendons of its neck unravelled and began to engulf him. Bits of the crosses splintered and faded into red dust.

It was in him, inside him, burrowing in his brain like a worm, exploring it with a sheer multitude of voices that dug out each and every thought, watching the memories, listening.

Get out of my head, damn it!

"It's nice in here... full of... interesting things..."

This is my mind! Me! Get the fuck out of it!

"You jacked off to that?"

FUCK OFF!!!

Everywhere and nowhere, all the peoples of the world bearing witness to his fears, his anger, his failures. All became one, a sonorous, musical voice, oddly juxtaposed upon the tooth-studded jaws of death. They were in him, sharing his blood, feeding off of it, and they saw *everything*.

The fleshy veins plunged ever deeper, pumping him full of the Archangel's blood, forcing itself into his mind. It was reading his new thoughts and reading his old thoughts and flashing them before his eyes, a highlight reel of everything he wanted to forget

He saw himself at that familiar beach, but it wasn't as he knew himself. He saw himself exploring the world with different hands, walking with different feet, seeing with different eyes. He saw himself in white rooms, alone, and remembered hating them. Then he saw himself breaking free of fluid, naked on the ground, and as he began to recollect how he had gotten there they carted him off and...

"And what?"

Obaddion tore the foetid arteries from his eyes and screamed.

There was a low moan as the Archangel stumbled backwards, splattering blood and urine amongst other things as its intended victim tore

free of the tendrils and veins and thrashed them like whips. Pale teeth gleamed in the hallow light before biting down on pink flesh and ripping savagely, hollow sockets filled with new eyes.

“Roses are red!”, cackled Obaddion as he rose to his feet and devoured a bloody handful of ropey flesh. “Violets are blue! You may be three-thousand-fucking feet tall, but I have the power of friendship and I’ll eat your soul!”.

He grinned with bloody teeth, tail swishing through the air with a dramatic flair. The scarlet crosses on his back began to shatter, the fragments crumbling and then melting into fluid that seeped back into his flesh. Wrenching his arms loose from their sockets and twisting them unnaturally so, he grabbed hold of a particularly large cross embedded in his flanks and slowly tore it free, swinging it afterwards in a clumsy flourish.

The Archangel screamed, halo appearing atop its hideous head and commanding light from the heavens, but Obaddion had already begun to charge, taking a flying leap towards it that culminated in him kicking through the immense ribcage. A scream shook the dream as the fallen angel collapsed in a spray of blood, and other screams soon followed as the cross found itself imbedded in the greasy, rank fluids of the brain.

Obaddion bellowed and tore the cross free, bringing it down again and licking the crimson spray from his lips. He was breathing heavily, gasping almost from want for breath as his body healed itself from the crosses. Lifting its head up with a rumbling groan, the Archangel attempted to snag him in its jaws but failed, struck again and again by the glass-sharp points of the cross, its own attack brought against it.

Blood gushed free of the brain amidst golden nectar, sunlight made liquid, and Obaddion threw the cross aside where it shattered and began to feed.

Chapter Twenty

Angel Eater

Whence came the great Archangels, and did they indeed sate their gluts upon the masses, birthing them anew in supple scarlet vigor as offspring of pained flesh, children of the rancid heath? Aye, indeed, and there and not, not there at all, but even when I close my eyes I see them!

I'm constantly dreaming but I can't sleep. I haven't slept one minute since that *thing* got into my blood and grew crosses out of my back. When my eyes close I see the pale skull, gasping for air, forcing itself along crowned atop a spindly mechanism masquerading as a body, an abomination that should, by all logic, if logic even has a place here, not even be able to stand.

It was inside me... inside my mind. The very sanctity of myself, all I really have now that my body is but a bad dream and the world but a series of broken memories. Not like Leben, not just a voice, a conversant. It was *there*, really *there*, rooting around inside, digging bad thoughts out from the dark corners where I had hidden them and kicking them into the spotlight.

I saw what you did.

We saw. We all saw.

So spoke the voice, many made into one. It wasn't lying.

Things played in my head and before my eyes, I wasn't in control. And I saw things, terrible things, and they weren't all mine. The souls in the Archangel were inside me, mixing my thoughts with theirs, my sorrows stirred into their own. They enjoyed it, I could feel it, I could hear the ecstatic tones in their voices as that rancid angel blood seeped into my very being.

I saw where I was born, but not with the eyes that were once mine.

I saw them making the me as I see myself, Obaddion, the monster. I saw them processing the viscera like produce, putting together each individual clone like cars on an assembly line. The basic form was grown up by itself, all duplicates of a single embryo twisted ages ago. Modifications were necessary for their future in the entertainment industry, once they had grown sufficiently they were taken to that dark place and torn apart and put back together again like the egg in the nursery rhyme. Here they added new organs into the tranquilized units, ripping them open, stuffing things in, adding brains. I saw where those brains came from, how they got them...

I saw myself...

Once upon a time, and though seen never more it will never be forgotten. I left the Archangel's body in a bloody, smoldering heap, just as they left mine. I tasted its blood, its being, and though the aftertaste was bitter on my tongue I wanted *more*. It's the only respite I have now, that brief ecstasy of angel blood cascading from the ruptured cerebrum and into my waiting maw. Nothing else puts the pain at bay, staves off the exhaustion. Nothing else tastes good anymore, as if I could even eat proper food.

Fighting this Archangel, just as the last. Perhaps the worst thing I've ever endured. I don't want to go near one ever again. I don't want to see one, to have my mind violated like before. I can't even have my thoughts to myself, damn it! But I also can't resist the taste of blood, that nectar I so crave... and besides... it binds us. The very tasting of it was what allowed the Archangel to invade my thoughts in the first place, another lovely example of my own self-sabotaging nature. I guess everyone has their fatal flaws, and I have many.

I'll wash off the blood and angel piss and grow back my skin. Then I'll get up and fucking do it again, hunt down, or perhaps be hunted down, by another. I can't resist the taste... like honey... like fire... like ice. Just to forget for a bit....



Dear God, it's consuming me. I'm letting it do so, I can't help but let my insatiable hunger drive me on, force me into more pain. Just like before with my spite, it kept me living when there was nothing left to live for. I tried to escape, beating my head on the walls, bleeding out on the floor, but that didn't work, and now I'm here if this is even worthy of being called a place. I can't escape, not by killing myself, as if that's even possible now, and not by drinking angel blood. I know this, but I can't help but try. Always running, always hiding, but I'm too slow to run and too big to hide. To stand and fight is the only option, but I can't face it.

With the flavor of the nectar lingering in my mouth, however, I can.
Kill an Archangel.

Two down, five to go.

The things I saw... not again...

But I can't resist having another taste...

That's just what they want. They just want me to suffer, become nothing more than a crazed, bloodthirsty corpse driving its rotting self ever farther, just to taste more, just to sink its teeth into flesh again. I'm letting them do it to me, just like I let people make me a monster.

They wished me a monster, and I complied.

I'm awful...

All I do is fight and die and I hate it. I hate that I was made to do it and I hate myself for following that dogma, but what else do I have? What

is this body if not but for violence? Even so, I can't stand it. I couldn't stand being torn apart in the arena and I can't deal with it now but I force myself to endure it anyway. For what!? There's nothing left. No one wants me. No one cares about me. Those few who know I exist hate me.

I force myself to do the one thing that gives me value but it's unbearable. When Atrox disemboweled me it was unbearable. When the Archangel nuked me from orbit with the inferno-borne hellfire of the stars it was unbearable. Why do I endure it? Because I have nothing else. Nothing else I love and care about has any value. Not as if any of it really exists out here.

There is nothing left for me to do but hunt down the Archangels, forcing myself to fight because, like it or not, that's my purpose. At least I have the promise of a feeding after killing one, but I know eating like that is consuming me, drawing me ever closer to that which I seek to destroy.

Prophet said I don't have to be a monster. Perhaps we can choose our own paths, but things interfere, and I can't change my nature, my appearance. I'm too stubborn to turn away from what I know and it's destroying me. I hate myself for it.

Please help me...

Who would do such a thing? Who even knows I exist? For all I know I could merely be in my own thoughts battling personal demons, perhaps the Archangels are nothing more than figments of my nightmares made like waking life.

I can't really explain any of this, how I feel, what I see. I don't know anything anymore, and I don't know if what I'm doing is right but I'm not sure if it's wrong either.

There's the creaking of immense joints in my ears, the sight of tooth-lined jaws in my eyes. I remember being inside one, robbed from whatever truly awaited after death to be forcibly grown anew, pumped with rotting meat and rancid bile and dumped into a place beyond all reason. The

Archangel isn't nearby but I see it, seeing its image forced into the world around me. I smell the decay... It's *delicious*...

No, no, no!

It's all so damn pointless! I hated people for making me to be a monster but I act that way willingly! For what? To give myself a purpose!? To prove I exist!? I don't even know anymore, all I know is that I can't stop myself from going on! I'll go on doing this for perhaps an eternity because I can't break past myself, I can't change, and it's destroying me. I didn't belong in life and I don't belong here, here where things are beyond comprehension and my mind nearly rips itself apart trying to comprehend everything. Everything! And nothing! It's all the same!

The smell of blood's in the air, angel blood. I remember the pain of those teeth on my flesh, burning away against the heat of the suns. I remember being ragdolled by the shockwaves and mind-raped by expired angel piss, and I'll fucking do it again! I hate myself for it but I'm not good enough to break free, to be anything but Obaddion. I can't be good because every time I try to feel love and compassion I'm reminded of... everything. Being shocked with prods... locked in the cell. Watching them tear a child apart, one of their own, and make him into something horrible... something he never wanted to be. It's wrong but I can't help but utterly despise people, and if I ever break free of this shitty reality, try and resist as I might, I'll destroy them just as I am with the angels now. I can't help but be a monster, and it's awful. I hate them for making me this way and I hate myself for going along with it. There's no escape. I won't wake up from this dream.

When the blood hits my tongue I begin to see patterns... it's like certain drugs I've heard about... everything flows and morphs like it's water but with extra dimensions... psychedelic, there's height, width, depth... and something else. Patterns... eyes... I tell myself the colors I see are colors and the eyes are eyes... sometimes they form apparitions of

a face... wings... the truest forms of what I devour. Something that wasn't meant to be seen... my brain breaks every time it happens... the weak memory alone is maddening.

A black moon, or perhaps star, wavers into my consciousness and passes. The waves grow eyes and recede, and the stones realign themselves with the dreamscape of stars. There's a sweet smell in the air, like vanilla, and cinnamon, but I know it comes from a walking corpse. Still, I can't resist the possibility of another taste...

Neener neener, Obaddion, angel eater.

Gradually the dream reshapes into another old memory. There's a church and a choir unseen begins to sing. Here's the church, there's the steeple, open the doors and eat all the people. I always hated getting up early for church...

The smell is stronger now, enough to salivate at.

It's high time I go angel hunting.

#

The great void rippled like water but was thick and soupy like oil, with an iridescent surface that flowed timelessly into the far corners of his mind. It carried a scent, like honey, and he found himself prying it open with both hands. Watery visage aside, it split and buckled like no normal material would, crumpling like a sheet in some places while shattering like glass in others, all intertwined, all surreal.

A splash as he dove in, bubbling as the steam erupting from his body boiled the waters. The smell of the Archangel was distant... but there was something else... something more immediate.

He found himself face to face with an immense, phallic mess of pale, wrinkled skin and coiled muscle. It had a body shaped like an unworldly monster of a grub and a mouth big enough to swallow him whole but saw the world with eyes so small on its gargantuan head that they looked like mere pinpricks.

“My, my child, how did you find your way here?”, it spoke with a voice like giant church bells, twisting teeth and bumpy gums into a smile. “And why do you smell so delicious?”.

“What the fuck are you?”, spat Obaddion, regaining control over himself and his hunger just long enough to speak, albeit angrily.

“Gula! Gula... child!”, coughed the great worm, vomiting up a few halos. “I am Gluttony! There were six more like me... ah... all with names, names of sins... but I tried to eat them, so they left”.

“The seven deadly sins... damn, I got the short end of the stick as far as interpretations of those go...”. Obaddion chuckled to himself, showing white teeth. “Just a bunch of penis worms with teeth”.

“Seven dragons... child”. Gula floated lazily in the void, which smelled of blood and was thick like grease. “Seven original dragons... our children are far greater in number...”.

“You’re a dragon?”.

“Yes... and a mother”. Gula smiled, twisting her head.

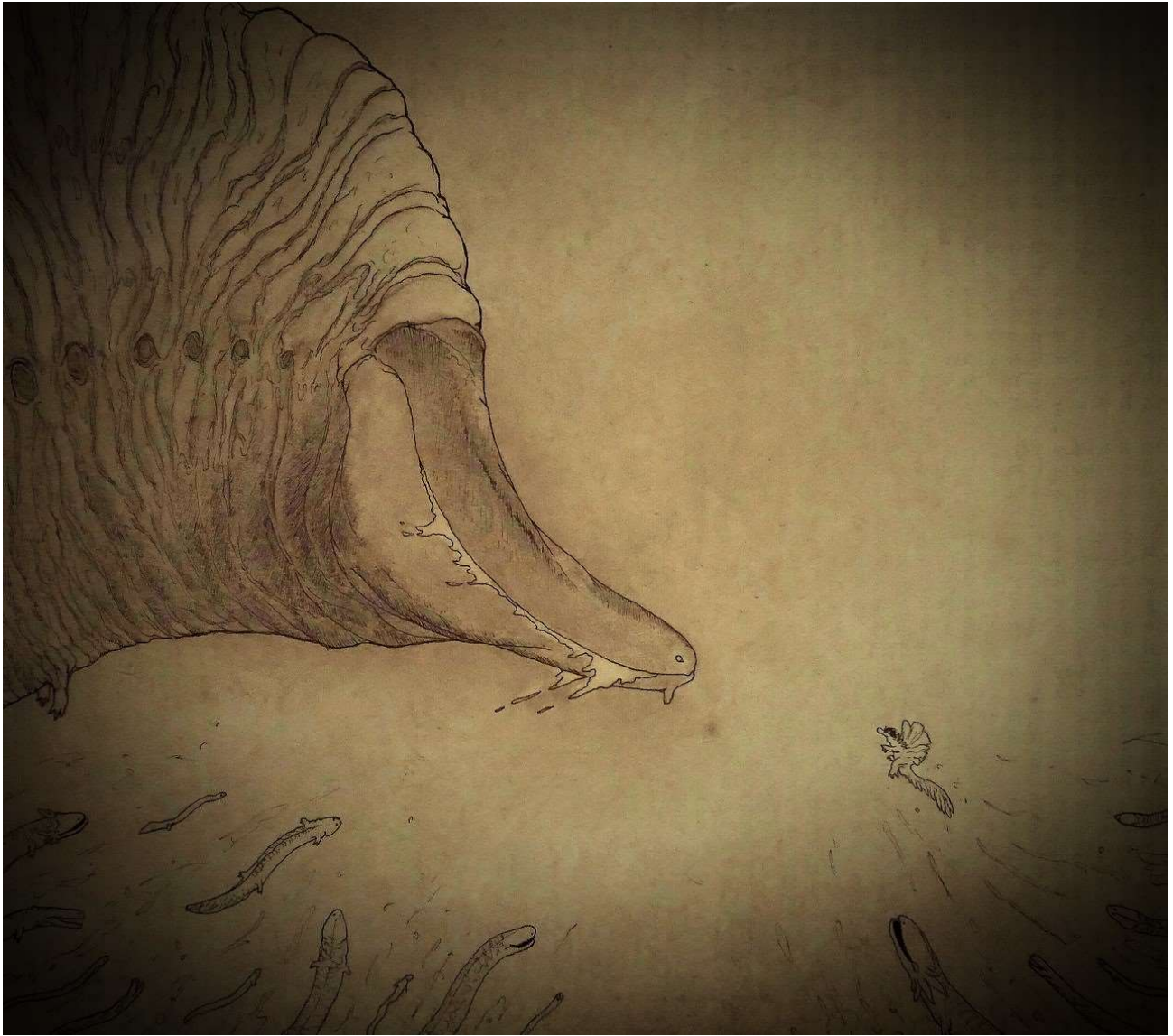
“Congratulations”.

“My babies wish to feed, child”.

He saw them, pale forms slowly ascending from the darkness below. Red gills and white skin, sometimes black, sometimes pale, writhing like worms, smiling with mouths full of needly teeth. It revived an old fear in him of the nasty things that live in the bottoms of lakes.

“If you were hoping for me to give you some kind of godly wisdom”, cackled Gula. “Or help you back to wherever you came from, you are mistaken. I’m just very hungry”.

Her offspring drifted closer, a sea of gently smiling phallic dragons.



“Whoa, same”.

In a terrific, bloody instant dozens of her offspring had swarmed him and begun to feed, savagely ripping apart his body and gulping down flesh, all mouths swarming and biting in a visceral display of pure gluttony. Obaddion screamed and took chunks out of whatever he could, constantly regenerating as they ate away at his flesh. The bodies of fallen dragons sunk down from the violent scene, displaying massive, bloodied gaps where their intended meal had bitten them.

Gula hovered in place as her offspring formed a vast, slimy ball eating away at the small creature within. At times one of the violent, swishing tails would disappear into the masses, thrown out again as a mutilated corpse. He was eating her offspring, and the bloody mess of it all smelled delicious.

She lunged forward, opened-mouthed in a silent scream, and engulfed the lot of them.

#

Obaddion kicked and roared into the darkness, violent frothing darkness, blunt mouths snapping at each other and slapping the adjacent forms with paddled tails. He ate as he worked, biting chunks out of the dragons, clawing ever further out of the throng as Gula tilted her immense head to swallow.

Just as the screaming hoard toppled into her throat and subsided, Obaddion had managed to cling to the roof of the cavernous mouth and hung on for dear life. His talons drew blood, blood that smelled of honey, and he was reminded of why he came in the first place.

To feed, of course.

He sunk his claws deeper into the palate, crushing the flesh in his hands and ripping it loose. The first layer was hard, but as more and more blood spilled into the mouth he grew stronger, more fierce, less reserved.

Gula screamed and shook violently, swimming like a hooked fish through the embryonic void, biting at nothing, surrounded by her many thousands of children whom she thrashed without care.

Obaddion held strong, biting away at the thick flesh until he could burrow into the soft interior, digging into the juices and meat that led to the brain. It smelled sweet, and tasted delicious, and he grew as he worked.

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD CHILD!!!”, screamed the worm as she twisted herself into painful loops and convulsed, vomiting out the fluids of her brain and biting at her offspring.

She was trailing blood and frothing out of the mouth by the time Obaddon lobotomized her brain, and she was ripping away at herself to hasten her death by the time he burst out of the top of her head with bleeding gums and bulging white eyes. He pulled his arms free and tore at the thick, gelatinous mess trailing from her ruptured cranium, grower bigger with each bite. The nectar of angels. He doubted the great worm was one, probably something more like Cancer, but the taste was there all the same.

With a roar he wrenched himself loose of the moaning, fading mother of dragons and swam upwards, leaving her starved offspring to eat her from the inside out.

#

Into a new dream, all was red and rippling, mirrors and flat waters.

Celestial but without stars, just a foggy, steam-laded sky that smelled of not smelling at all. Obaddon clambered up out of nothing, bigger, stronger, but hurt. He clutched his ruptured intestines with a bloody hand, waiting for his regenerating stomach to take them back in.

Not as aware as before, less thinking. What thoughts he did have were simpler, the want to feed, the urge to kill. The pain hurt but he noticed it less, and the taste he wanted more than ever before. Because without the nectar, things would really start to hurt.

He would think more, feel more, remember more. The pain would be there, real, and he would sink back into the familiar despair he had in the cell, in the city. He would agonize over being trapped in the dream, in a world of old things he wasn't supposed to even know existed. But with the taste, just a little taste, he could bear to go on a while longer.

Just a little taste.

He smelled the familiar scent, a recurring memory. An Archangel.

#

Today I killed what was actually my second Archangel. It tasted delicious. Leben says that the second one I fought was actually the resurrected first. How lovely.

#

Three down, four to go. They hurt my brain.

#

I met a real Archangel today. He was pure light in the abstracted form of a man, carried a two-pointed spear, and looked like he could bench-press Panama. He also smelled delicious.

So I tried to eat him. He drove the spear through my cheek and out of my lower jaw.

I screamed something... it was either about the power of friendship or how God hated me. I don't know.

"Lord rebuke thee", he said, or something else. More angels came.

They tasted good, and the taste made the pain of the spears go away.

I don't remember what happened after that.

#

A moment of sanity. In some ways it's nice. I can take inventory of what I've done the past few... I don't even know how long it's been. You can't track time out here, not accurately.

Killed two more Archangels, the skeletal pregnancy-metaphor kind. All I thought of at the time was the taste... how hungry I was... how delicious they smelled. I was mad when they hit me with the heat of suns and vomited on my face and ate their souls mindlessly.

The first I beat to death with a cross it grew out of my face. The second I decapitated, lifting the immense head over my own with both hands and tossing it into a nearby mess of crumbling architecture. Both fights would have involved unbearable pain. I probably would have been mind-raped again too, if not for the nectar clouding my thoughts. The bliss of it all.

I need it.

Or do I?

Is it right to revert back to my old mindless state? In a way this now-wavering sentience of mind is a gift... I can truly appreciate things... see beauty... relish comfort.

But I must kill the Archangels. To do that I must be strong, I must be able to resist the pain. I need the taste of their blood, the power it gives me. It's the only thing that keeps me going, even if it's destroying me all the while...

Look at me! Damn it, I'm pathetic... watching myself fade away and not caring to stop it. I don't have to do this either. I could stop, stop this mad hunt and live... peacefully... but there's the familiar rage... and something else. I want to do this, even though it hurts, because I want to be strong and prove I have worth, prove I can do useful things and have a purpose, seal away the weak, slimy thing that is my true self under immense layers of muscle and hide.

Everything's moving in the corners of my eyes. I know it's not real but it's fucking terrifying. Wheels of fire, wheels and eyes, skulls and teeth moving as they shouldn't amidst the light and speaking with voices like God. All there, all the product of drinking angel blood and angel shit and angel cum and whatever else comes out of their disgusti... delicious brains. Sadly I can't stop, even with all the side effects, because I can't bear the thought of being without it, feeling that same raw, visceral pain, thinking those thoughts... like I do now, but so much worse.

I do what I do not because I love it but to substitute for something missing, something I know I'll never find. Come to think of it, I don't really know what I want. I want to be loved and accepted... included... but I tell myself I hate people. I want peace but choose to fight.

The woods, I guess, but I can never have that back. Now I want human comforts, human things, spurred by human desires... fuck you for making me this way, O' Creator. You just had to have your monster fights, didn't you?

Emptiness. I miss art, making things, but it always brought pain. I guess birth comes hand-in-hand with agony, you can't create something without destroying something else. Ironically my art was always driven by emptiness, things I'd never have. I drew monsters because I wanted others like me, I drew trees because I missed the forest. But it was all so shallow, because there's much deeper desires I could never work up the courage to bring to light.

Even art can't fill that gap in my soul... just like fighting can't. War, architecture, technology, religion... none of it will ever cleanse the innate emptiness of the human heart. I have hands. I want to paint with them... pig's blood... orange juice... once upon a time I had pencils and paper and that was where Obaddion was truly born... ill-conceived after a late night of kaiju flicks. Everyone has art in some way or another, or perhaps some other means of filling that universal hole in their hearts.

I am alone.

Starving for something more than food... more than blood.

I know I can never get it, never break past myself and pursue the things I truly want. Even if I had that courage the world would take it poorly, because of the simple ultimatum that I am and will always be a horrifying monster.

It fucking hurts.

Chapter Twenty One

Life Could be an (Abstract) Dream

Obaddion finally felt the immense spear stuck through his face and wrenched it out. It would do well in killing the Archangel, even if it burned his hands...

Two to go.

Once they were gone, though... what would become of him?

His skin, having been deprived of angel blood long enough to overcome the numbness, politely informed him that he was riddled with spears and crosses and countless other weapons from divine things he hadn't consciously fought. It burned.

Some he managed to rip out, leaving them to sink into the bowels of his dream, but others projected from scars in inaccessible places, acting as monuments to the mindless conquests of their bearer.

Holy, holy, holy!

A vision, white wings and jagged teeth. They flocked after the lumbering Archangel like crows, vultures clothed in the plumage of doves.

Those damned Seraphim!

#

God hates me... that's why I see halos on the space monsters!

New eyes, new eyes! I've lost mine and grown new ones thrice upon a time (a heaping pile of shit that was) and to no avail! See the world differently, aye? So said the horned beast who fights for the Lord, an angel, delicious they are, and I called him friend but ate him like the rest! Monster, monster... greater than all the rest... I'm becoming what they wanted... savage beast...

Just a little taste! I'd drink their piss and shit... if only it stopped burning! Memories, I'll kill them all. I'll kill them all and then myself and I'll fucking do it again! Again and again and again, God won't let me die

because he wants me to suffer! Kill myself! That's bad, so I'll fight incomprehensible beasts with no names and hope they do it for me! Why, I ate that winged man-squid just the other day! Now, what was his name?

Redeem myself in blood because I can't end it all! But I've already sinned, so what's the point? I already jacked off to the sparkle force and overdosed on space-angel brain-fluid! Oh, and I ate children! They were delicious! I don't want love... life... I want Swiss cheese!

It's all going away! Tumbling down, tumbling down, tumbling
dowwwwwwwwwwn!

Down, down to the goblin town! Ho, ho, my lad! To Hell we go!

It isn't so bad. I was there before! Perhaps after a while... says I... you've become so horrible that the Devil welcomes you. And if you're really screwed up, he wants to fuck you!

Losing myself! I'm not an animal anymore, and fer' sure I ain't whatever critter I was in dat' darned cell! Tee hee! I see nothing but wheels and fire and eyes, the true forms of the things I eat, gesticulating before my eyes amidst a series of memories that aren't mine! Mine!

WHAT THE FUCK IS EVEN MINE!?

This here body isn't mine! These memories aren't either! This brain isn't mine, this blood isn't mine, this dream isn't mine! All is GOD'S!!! Borrowed souls, borrowed flesh, mashed together because some damn dirty apes wanted their radioactive TV beasts made into real meat, really there, so they could dance and get kung-fucked by the Plane Panther! His crimefighting covers up a basic insecurity! So says the theme song, and those never lie!

Eats sushi from a pail! His mother never really loved him!

Ripping out my eyes doesn't make it stop, I still see the pansies!

Maybe I need a vacation... not Japan, I've been there and it's overrated. No one had their damned subtitles turned on! France? I speak French... spoke French... never remembered learning it but it's there! Once again, not mine! Baguette!

Je suis le baguette! Vous sont le baguette!

NOUS SONT LE BAGUETTE!!!

Sadly, I have une petite baguette.

Sometimes I regain control and do more than slaver for cosmic piss and ramble mindlessly, like now for example. That's when I tell myself I have to be a good boy and use nice words... but then everything starts to hurt again! It hurts... hurts so bad without angel blood... just a taste. It makes me strong, but at the rather unpleasant cost that I think like this! Or not at all! Preferably nothing, preferably mindless hunger, because even in this deranged frenzy I know that I am bad and wrong... but I CAN'T STOP IT!

I CAN'T STOP ANYTHING! I COULDN'T STOP THE SPACE WHALES FROM RAMMING THEIR SPACE DICKS INTO MY HEAD AND MAKING MY MIND THEIRS! I COULDN'T STOP THE FILTHY HUMANS FROM LOCKING ME IN A CEMENT BOX AND BEATING ME WITH ELECTRIC PRODS! I COULDN'T EVEN STOP MYSELF FROM EATING THE ONE ACCURSED FLESH BEAST TO EVER SHOW ME ANYTHING BESIDES CRUELTY! IT WASN'T LOVE BUT IT WAS BETTER THAN HATRED, AND I ATE IT!!!

The angels! Oh, the angels! Take me up to Heaven, what's left of me that is! Please, please, I beg you, just free me from this body, this body that isn't mine, this body that forces me to kill and feed no matter how much it hurts!

Here, I'll help you, I'll gouge out my eyes and grow new ones, new eyes to see your world, to see you even better! Don't worry, I don't deserve to die peacefully! There hasn't been a moment of peace in my entire fucking life!

Wrenched from reality. The cuts start forming words. I know the angels will understand. That's a funny part of dreams. Sometimes you just know things.

Not real alphabet words, angel words, the words flowing through the grooves in their brains and dancing atop their halos. I write to them on my arms and legs, a body that isn't mine! What irony, that, for all their technology and science, this monster they've created is essentially the same as the centuries-old sweaty men in rubber suits! That's what I am! A guy in a monster suit, one without a body to tie himself to save artificial meat and armored rubber, bones and wires and whatever else they stuffed me with when I was drugged and motionless on a steel table! Angels speak in pain and blood! Screams! Humans never understood them but my abstract friends certainly will! They'll help... they'll help! Our blood is shared after all. Spilling tears and blood as I carve their angular letters across my bicep, along my forearm, from my calf to my ankle. Warm red seeps through my cries for help. Without reality to anchor me and real flesh to bind me, my last hope is that someone will answer. They won't come unless there's blood...

No one comes. I need a clearer message, a stronger scent...

More blood, on my face, my sides, everywhere! Come and get it, it's all yours!

"What are you doing!?", exclaims a distraught, grandfatherly voice.

Silence bitch, I'm talking to angels!

"Obaddion, no...".

I ALREADY ATE YOU!

#

Reality kicks in shortly afterwards.

I'm sitting in a pool of my own blood, screaming at a sky that isn't there.

What the fuck was I doing?

Talking to angels... damn...

Funny enough, I guess whatever I wrote really was angel-speak, because here comes the Archangel! Trillions of tons of decaying dream,

three... four... five... who knows how many thousands of feet tall! It's not there but there it is!

Did I mention I met my spirit guide a while back? Or the other day? I can't remember, anyways, I think as far as spirit guides go, it was pretty sweet.

I think most people get wolves or something.

I got three-hundred feet of alien asshole-faced demon-ape... thing.

It was nice enough. Showed up, got me addicted to angel blood, refused to elaborate and then turned into Jesus or something. Like that lion from the television, the one that lives in the wardrobe!

Now, if by some lovely change of events the entry criteria is pretty lax and I make it into Heaven, the first thing I'll do is find whoever made us think angels were pretty dudes with wings and slap them silly. Because right now our friendly neighborhood Archangel is slamming me into a monolithic cathedral with its shockwaves and shooting tendrils out of its mouth to...

....dear God... NO!

GET OUT OF MY MIND!!!

"*Our* mind", says the voice, many hundreds of voices combined into a single, beautiful one that makes me want to sleep. Expired angel piss and cum cradles my brain, trying to sway me away from the knowledge of what it really is. "You are nothing. You have nothing. You experience the world with a stolen soul and a manufactured body, and the memories you recollect now are in fact those one of who died years ago, the very moment you were born".

You're one to talk.

"You never could. To the world around you, you were always just a stupid animal. What is the point of you having these thoughts if no one else acknowledges them?"

Inside me... inside my soul. I feel the rotting meat as it snakes through my flesh and circulates through my blood, sharing my dreams, my

thoughts, playing bad memories like some kind of highlight reel of my failures.

Not that again... no...

“You’re disgusting. And weak. You know behind all this armor and muscle is a pathetic, scared little boy, one who formed that shell to block out the world and keep himself safe. No matter how great your physical strength is you’ll always be weak, because unlike most people you’re so afraid of others that you choose to be alone, so desperate to not be judged that you do something you hate, hide who you really are. But now, you see, all of humanity will bear witness to you. Your trials, your sorrows, your failures... all the dirty little things you do in the dark... and they’ll laugh. They’ll find it funny, because you’re just a sad joke, an edgy little afterthought in the toy chest of God. It’s what you wanted after all, for people to recognize you, feel your sorrows. Now take it!”.

No! No! No!

NO! DAMMIT!

GET OUT! GET OUT! OUT! OUT! OUT!

“You don’t really want to be alone, but you’re too afraid to confront the world. You’ll live alone the rest of your life wanting to be loved, but you’re too cowardly to try and find it for yourself!”.

I’LL KILL YOU!

“Not until I’ve had my fun!”.

More angel than Obaddon. It’s inside me... in my body... flowing around under my skin, making new veins, new arteries. I feel it in my stomach... my heart... my brain... growing new things... like when they did organ transplants back in the lab... but I feel it all! Pumping me full of blood... and other things... things I don’t want!

Stop! STOP! PLEASE, DAMMIT, STOP!!!

They’re all seeing it... every last time I bled and cried and failed and jerked off to weird shit... laying alone in my own blood... seeing past

Obaddion and into a past I don't want to confront... a past that is more true to me than this creature suit will ever be...

No one is there for me... they're all laughing... it's a fucking joke.

The Archangel is holding me in midair, not with its tendrils but with the strength of its mind and the disorderly reality of this dream. Its mouth is opened wide like a snake, the throat that isn't there glows golden, and I see wheels, eyes, it doesn't have those but there they are... all laughing... fuck... I hate people... leave me... LEAVE ME ALONE!!!

Screaming, the ribcage spreads and expands with curved bones lifting until they hover straight out aside the immense vertebrae. There's the hearts and lungs and assorted entrails, pumping with fluids every color of the rainbow, sending out more slimy things to penetrate my skin and eat away at my soul... and I'm aware the whole time... not savage... not crazed... fully sane as this thing forces itself into my very being. It's taking me into itself, engulfing me in fat and rotting muscle and spoiled blood, drowning me in the nectar I crave... but I don't want it now...

It's slowly closing around me, engulfing myself in it. I'll disappear... become one with it, just as Leben wanted. All mocking, all laughing, surrounded by all of humanity but still alone. I fucking hate them...

#

Obaddion burst from the ribcage and screamed to the Heavens, hoping to break them.

The Archangel nearly toppled to the ground but regained its composure, just in time to witness Obaddion's angel spear drive itself in through one side of the immense brain and out the other in a spray of blood. It screeched like a wailing child as he tackled it to the ground, crying out with a voice that fit poorly on the immense body as he ripped open the bulging grey exterior of its mind and began to eat it alive.

#

Six down.

One to go.

#

I think I'll keep this spear. Can't remember if the Archangel was named Michael or Gabriel. Can't remember anything anymore... except the things I don't... like... my failures.

I hate myself.

#

I SMELL BIRDIES!!!

You know, the big ones that sing the Lord's prayer backwards and eat your soul. That kind. Kinda like a stork, it's a bit hard to tell the two apart, but storks are much smaller and don't have teeth. Seraphim... yes... they're called Seraphim... and their blood tastes like warm honey and flows like milk.

When they fly their wings shimmer like the reflection of the moon upon a quiet nighttime pond. Their skin is pale and smooth like ivory, soft as leaves but strong as steel. Sometimes, before they channel the fires of Hell and stars alike into a condensed beam to rip your entrails out, their halos light up in a pretty night-light sort of way.

Swimming through space, playing my music. It's soothing, after...
You know...

Sometimes I see things moving, just outside the corners of my eyes. Wheels and eyes, Ophanim they're called. Other things too, things like Cancer and Gula. The elder beings that aren't really there, senile creatures dating back to the dawn of creation itself. They all smell delicious, flowing and pulsing just outside my dream, but it's the birdies I'm after.

I swim slowly. I would call this liquid substratum space, because it's colored with a backdrop of stars and nebulae and all the lights and darkness of the heavens, but it feels like water... no... oil... and smells like flesh... like the womb. Sick of all this weird pregnancy-metaphor crap. I miss the lakes I used to swim in... the sea. Even if it had jellyfish. At least the ones back in real life weren't the size of constellations.

In the distance there's a storm, a vast rumbling spiral, red as blood, bright as fire... a gate opens up in the center and for a split second I see them... jaws and teeth, soaring over a ruined cityscape that I know isn't really there.

That, I suppose, will be the next chapter of this dream.

A scent in the air... blood? My dreams are full of it.

I see them now, dismembered bodies sinking into nothing... trailing their luxuriant nectar amidst tattered intestines and beaten entrails. Angels.

Holy, holy, holy!

The real deal, untainted by Leben. I've fought them before, seeing as I'm arguably no better than the monstrous beings I hunt. These are the kind that would come down and say, "be not afraid" and give you some message from God. At least that's how it always went in the Bible. When I met my first angel it ate my soul. Technically a demon I guess, but, like Prophet said, they're just fallen angels after all. Not like names matter. The real deal, the buff guys with wings and halos, they tried to kill me too.

But thankfully these are all dead, sinking like ships... everywhere... not really there but I see them, sometimes small but sometimes I see them in sizes comparable to my own... two-thousand foot tall humanoid monstrosities crumbling into nothing.

A dead Seraphim floats nearby, slowly burning away in its own fire and light. It looks as if was impaled through the chest with an immense spear... serves those incessant bastards right.

Six wings... wings and eyes... how I see them is not their true form but a reflection of Leben. Just as God made apes in his image Leben made angels into his, monstrous flying things with cetacean skulls and voices smooth enough to lure you into the grave.

The black moon. It's talking again.

I can't understand a word of it, but that doesn't matter. It's what the words make me think... what they make me feel... it tells me enough.

Open my eyes and it's there, hovering in the distance, outlined in a brilliant red light like blood.

Burning like Hell itself, even from here. Perhaps when all is said and done the demons will be consumed in its ebony fire... demons like me...

The gate opens wider, and I pause. Enter the storm and face the beings who killed Prophet. Four are left. Four Seraphim... planet-busting soul-eating angels of the inferno. They'll eat me alive no doubt... but I'll come back. I should have died in every one of these fights but everything always grew back... God won't let me rest.

Feel my skin melt away, feel the teeth sink into my flesh and corrupted souls seep into my mind. The tortures and pains of Hell. Once before, then again, and again... I can't resist another taste, hurting myself doing it because it's the only thing I'm good for... fighting... I died every time and came back and I'll fucking do it again.

Chapter Twenty Two

Listening to the Birds

An old memory finally managed to wrestle free of the mud and float to the conscious portion of my swampy, mashed-together mess of a mind.

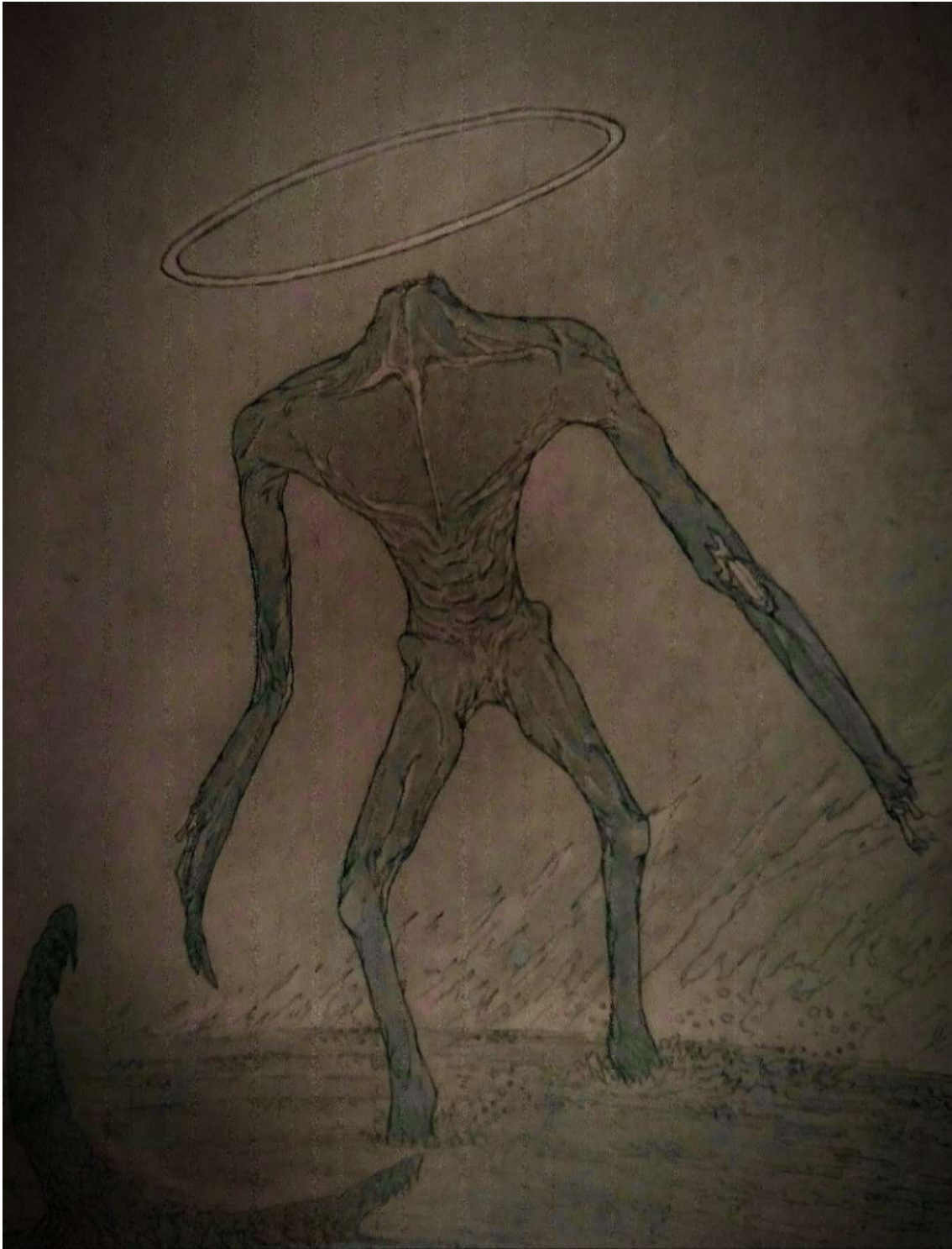
It was a good one. I was in the woods, a little gravel trail, and it was summer and I was hot and the heat made me tired but the afternoon light was so... nice. It's been so long since I've seen light like that, the closest approximation being an uncanny dream of a summer field, tall grasses and a solitary tree. I had some apple pie and there was music so serene it was unsettling.

Then a clown asked me if I was enjoying the fries and next thing you know I was on a broken moon fighting a decapitated human corpse with a halo for a head.

Clowns are funny. I met a writhing mass of orange lights the other day in the void. It said it was actually a spider who was actually a clown and that it fed on fear and children, which reminds me of a weird show I watched where one of the characters turned out to be a dragon who was actually a river spirit. Anyways, the mass of talking clown lights told me it was an eater of worlds and children.

Naturally, I did the right thing and ripped it apart.

Back to the memory. I was in the woods. I had a dog too, which was weird, seeing as I've never been fond of them, but for some reason I liked this dog. It wasn't just mine though, a shared thing... family... not mine... I don't really know what is.



There were hawks, two of them. Beautiful birds. A fun thing I used to do on long trips was spot the hawks perched on telephone poles by the side of the road. I remembered recognizing the ones in the forest, I'd seen

them before. A mated pair. They were flying from tree to tree and arguing with loud trilling cries, high enough in the trees that spotting them was a task in itself. I remember there was an owl in those woods too, I'd seen it two or three times and heard it once.

Good times. I was always so happy when I saw them, when I could be alone in the sun and listen to the birds and the wind rustling the trees.

I miss the woods... and the birds...

A stolen soul and a manufactured body. I never really experienced those things... I just carry the memories of one who did, and it hurts. I shouldn't want this things... I'm a monster. I shouldn't have morals and reasoning because I was made for violence. Even with the knowledge of what is right and wrong I carry innate urges to kill and destroy. At times it's just anger... bad-tempered rage, but more and more frequently it's a burning desire to feel flesh part beneath my teeth and blood flow down my throat.

I've murdered children and eaten angels... good things... pure things.

I'm a monster, and I'll punish myself for it by fighting these God-awful space birds until the end of time.

#

A city, because that's where kaiju fights always seemed to take place. As soon as he passed into it Obaddion knew something was off. Some of the buildings meshed like bad CGI, others look like fakes, cheap replicas of cardboard and plywood. Plastic model helicopters and tanks shot him with missiles that felt real.

The Seraphim. First four, circling in that loose halo of deliberate wingbeats and shrieking cries, but two rose up without warning and disappeared into the clouds. He felt the air shudder and knew they had passed into another dream. Perhaps they thought that two was enough.

Of course, they would absolutely destroy him. Unlike the Archangels, the Seraphim could move very fast and actually flew, soaring rather than using a disconcerting levitation.

But that was what he wanted.

Fight and die.

As any good monster does.

The twin Seraphim swooped down, circling around each other and spinning as the halos hovering above their heads burned with brilliant flame.

We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!

We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!

We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!

Come with us, be free! Be holy!

One made a pass and barreled into him with a screech, white-hot talons practically melting away his thick armor and muscle. He screamed and bit down on its neck, relishing the agony as he swung it around like some kind of overgrown chew toy, bashing it into fake buildings and grinding it against crumbling infrastructure.



The second Seraphim got him from behind, sinking claws deep into his shoulders and breaking the nerves. Paralyzed, his left arm drooped

limply at his side. No matter. *It'll grow back*. He had to remind himself, turning to snap at the screaming angel. The first wriggled free, taking to the air again after messily regaining posture.

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Now they both circled again, gliding effortlessly on wings that looked feathered like a bird's but were smooth and rubbery like whale flesh. *Like human skin*. He thought of the forms they had originally appeared as, human figures crowned with wings and stars.

One dove down and struck his neck, clamping onto his face with a beak full of jagged teeth like bent nails. A tooth popped his eye and he roared, grabbing it by the stomach with his good arm and ripping it open so that the radiant majesty of its colon and pancreas could be revealed to the world. The heart flashed before his eyes for just an instant, there once second and crushed beneath his jaws the next.

Unfortunately, an exploding star is not a fun thing to take to the face.

Obaddion tilted his charred skull to the sky and screamed. The second Seraphim wasted no time at all in barreling into his stomach, returning the death of its ally in kind by tearing the flesh and spilling out bloody entrails. Intestines the size of trains spilled out onto the roadways and condos, splattering skyscrapers with blood and bits of torn meat.

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy!

Holy, holy, holy

"Shut up, dammit!"

He collapsed on all fours, pinning down the struggling angel, and began to maul it. The skin and muscle on his face was gone but his teeth were still there, teeth to rip open the Seraphim's ivory torso and break its heart.

“Damn, this is disappointing! Only a few minutes in and you’re already dying!”. He wasn’t arrogant about it, not happy either. “Not as strong as I thought you’d be...”.

The Seraphim simply screeched and vomited in his face.

“Success is not always a good thing”, trilled a voice. *Leben*.

“It’s been awhile”. Obaddion roared and tore off the Seraphim’s head, which bought him some time as it began to regrow. His own body began to heal, arm snapping back into use and skin regrowing over the blackened skull.

“Or maybe just a few days. Really, do you know how long you’ve been on this bloodthirsty crusade? Anyways, I’ll *give* my angels to you, because each time you kill one...”.

“It corrupts me even more”.

“Exactly! Do you know that I love you?”, trilled *Leben*. “You’re aware enough to recognize that you’re destroying yourself but too stubborn... and too fearful... to turn away from it! It hurts, doesn’t it? Watching yourself slip away with each taste... growing more and more like a savage beast. But don’t worry, when your soul finally passes you’ll have all of eternity to spend with me, and we can repeat the fun little activity we did the other day!”.

“What... wait...”. Obaddion stiffened up. “The voice was yours? You sick fuck!”.

“The Archangels are just flesh machines after all... extensions of myself powered by the souls of others and armored by the flesh of long-dead monstrosities. I think as far as big bads transferring their power into random objects go, it was a smart choice. Smarter than some old diary, or a magic ring!”.

“Fuck off”.

“Is it because I said that I love you? I really do! I could give you all the angel piss and anime plushies in the world, all your weird, dirty little pleasures...”.

“I said fuck off”.

“Just remember, I’ll always be with you in your heart! Hah ha!”.

“How lovely”.

Obaddion screamed as the Seraphim, which had managed to reattach its disembowled body to its bony head, sunk its teeth into his calf. Working his hands through the gaps between the teeth, he pried its jaws open and snapped them in half.

“An eye for an eye, as the good book says”, he chuckled to himself, willing a memory of a cross to become part of the dream. Surprisingly it did, rising up out of the rubble and glinting iridescent black in the sunlight.

“Mary had a little lamb... little lamb... little lamb...”. The Seraphim screamed as he hoisted its broken body up and began nailing its wings to the cross.

Obaddion kept humming until the fallen angel hung just like Prophet had, draining blood from its ruptured stomach onto the cityscape below. He’d finish the rest later.

#

The curtains shimmered like gold and flowed like water across scarred concrete.

“What is this place?”.

“A waking dream, a memory, a desire, all bound into one”. The bronze beast curled in and around itself, metallic body clanging softly but flexing like a snake’s.

“It would be nice if something here made sense for once”.

The bronze beast laughed appreciatively.

“All fun and games until the stars start talking”. Obaddion swallowed some mucus that had stuck to the roof of his throat. “Thank you... I guess”.

“What are you thankful for?”.

“You helping me”.

“Really? I’ve done very little. All is you... I’m just a guide organizing the dreams to help you find... memories... and a scavenger too”. The bronze beast gurgled and gulped down a Seraphim kidney.

Obaddion coughed a bit and scratched an itchy spot on his throat, watching as the bronze beast opened its mouth wide and sunk its teeth into the curtains, ripping them loose.

“What will this dream be like?”.

“Every bit as bloody and convoluted as the rest”.

“To quote a purple fellow with a giant chin, reality is often disappointing”.

“I wouldn’t get the reference”, rang the beast’s voice. “But go on ahead... this is the last we’ll see of each other”.

“Are you an angel?”.

“You may call me one if it suits you”.

#

I took a bath today. Never bathed in the sea before, but there’s a first time for everything.

Like crimson rivers flows the blood of angels, the Seraphim. I wipe the grease from my mouth and sink deeper below the rippling blue, azure under the sky but green below. Sometimes the blood takes the form of eyes, calling back to a time when the Seraphim had their old bodies and praised God.

Feeling... better.

I looked at birds. Remembered better ones.

The world is deep with old evils and grim with cruel realities, but nature handles it well, and a bit of rest and pleasure staves off the pain. Seagulls roost on my spine and pick at the scabs. There is one Archangel left and two Seraphim. I hear them calling.

Other things too... in the span of my time as a dream I’ve seen things beyond comprehension and fought them and talked with them and eaten

them... angels... demons... dragons... most I don't remember... knowing of their presence only through the wounds they leave behind.

The voices grow louder and spirals of eyes cloud my vision. The water's talking now, even if I can't hear the words. Damn...

It doesn't matter if it's not real, if I'm mad about something I have a reason. It's never about what's real because nothing's real here... I made half this eldritch shit up even if I don't want to admit it.

Drawing closer... the Archangel chews through one plane of existence and then another. It's greedy, excited... slavering at the thought of tasting me... feeling me... perverted fucking space whales. It doesn't matter that I kill them because they exist to create despair... each time they win... they win because I hurt and degrade with each fight... fighting... I hate it. I fucking hate fighting. I despise violence, but I'm tied to it. I was born... made strong, made to fight and die so that's what I must do... I force myself to anyways. There's a want for peace but with peace I am nothing... with peace I contemplate more... feel more. I need the taste of blood to keep me going... not to save anyone... just to keep existing.

They say bad guys never win. I guess I'm a bad guy. But so is Leben, and even if that fucked-up space angel loses to God it's won me and my soul...

One more... just one more... maybe two choir birds on the side...

I can't...

But I will, of course I will... I hate it.

Here it comes, tearing the curtains... calling my name.

It says it knows me... speaking with the voice of...

...a friend... liar... I never had those... only a bunch of pet frogs...

...that is not me... not my name...

...I don't need your help...

...fuck off.

Gentle is the voice. It doesn't attack, standing there, hideous as ever. I can't judge. I'm hideous too. I scream at it and throw an aircraft carrier. This dream-borne movie set is full of things like that.

It waits, towering amidst the fake buildings by the shore.

"Obaddion..."

No.

"I can help you..."

You'll fuck me in the brain just like all the rest.

"No... I won't. I just want a friend. We knew each other... once".

I roar. Glass shatters and cardboard buildings go flying.

"Trust me... we had old lives... old bodies... please. I won't hurt you. But we were close once... I just want a friend".

No, you're five-thousand feet of faceless fun. And a highly addictive drug.

"I'm not what you think I am".

Nothing is what I think it is. But everything bites or yells or eats me alive.

The Archangel takes a few tentative steps closer. Too close.

I throw an angel spear that strikes it straight through the stomach. It screams... like a child. There is blood, always blood, because right from the beginning I knew it.

Out of the water like the raging, mindless beast I am. I crash through buildings and scream, blindly charging to it where it stands, patiently.

No beams of sun, no mind-invading ropes of flesh. I'm on it in an instant, ripping off the halo and bashing it over the head... fifteen-billion tons of dream-made molten steel... it screams and I relish the screams... hate them too but I hate everything... I need to stop but I can't.

Ripping open the stomach... the hearts... strangling it with its own innards and snapping its jaws in half. I rip apart its womb and its liver, splattering black bile like ink... plunging my hand in the brain and tearing it free...

I turn away and fling the grey matter into the sea, leaving the smoldering corpse behind me. The dream begins to fade.

There's blood on my hands... red... it has the familiar smell... and taste. Bits of tissue too, dull... and scaly. I look up to the horizon where the sun begins to set... always sunrises and sunsets in my dreams... amber skies.

The Archangel is alive and well, silhouetted against the sinking sun.

It looks up at me... from this angle the bony mouth is almost curved into a smile.

Didn't I... kill...

...oh no.

I turn around.

It looks... it looks like myself.

Chapter Twenty Three

Livin' the Dream

I just hurt everyone.

Therefore I am better off alone. Even if it hurts.

Even if I don't really want to be.

I hurt people and I hurt monsters and I hurt Prophet and myself. An instrument of violence. A nature I can't deny.

Blame the angels. The Archangel got in my head, made me hallucinate. But it's still my fault, because I drank their blood and thus made myself one with them. I don't have to hunt them down and eat their souls, but I choose to, because I'm too weak to turn away from it. Too weak, too stubborn. I watch myself burn away but I can't put out the flames.

This nature of mine is downright awful, but it's as much as part of me as my soul. In the eyes of men and God it is wrong to kill and destroy but that's what they made me to do. They wanted monsters, they wanted demons, an enemy, so they made me. Fine, I guess, but why do I have to be aware of it all? Guns shouldn't question why they shoot things, just as fire shouldn't question why it burns.

Suns molded into screaming demons that masquerade as angels and rape abstract dreams. Fire twisted into steel, rings of light and burning halos to crown a cruel skull, singing with beautiful voices, carried by six wings like those of doves, bright as stars. They speak in blood and pain, ejaculating cruel judgement with fervent choir and needle-teeth.

Once I was young and I waited for my melons and stared at grey walls. When the need arose I walked into the light and fought beasts like myself, names... human-made... Atrox, Gluttons... now I leap from dreams and sail through voids, fighting deeply personal issues, dreams,

nightmares... they manifest themselves as Biblical monstrosities of screaming light.

Drugs are bad, kids.

Don't do drugs. Especially the shit that comes out of space angel brain fluid.

I hate God. I hate God because I know when this is all over I won't rest. I won't fade into nothing, because he wants me to suffer. I suffered in life and I suffered now and I'll suffer in whatever comes next, all because a life of pain and fear made me unsightly in his eyes.

Eyes... eyes... they're everywhere but the angels have none... yet so many all the same.

Was it my fault that I hated people for torturing me... cheering as a mutated frog disemboweled me in front of a live audience? Locking me away in bright cells and dark cages... starving me... hating me because they made me that way...

Was it wrong that I paid them back? They were awful. Even if they didn't know... stupidity is perhaps worse than evil... and harder to fight. Ignorant swine. No one cared when I screamed and kicked in my own blood, made to do what I hate most.

No one cares about me. No one wants me. So they can all die while I spend eternity suffering because of it, wasting away with each successive acid trip space monster battle.

The dream's reforming. It does that with varying frequency. Sometimes it changes so rapidly I can't make sense of where I am... as if I could in the first place. Other times I get worlds... worlds to explore, talking with toads that drive motorcars... getting kicked out of sleepovers for saying bad words...

Torn apart. That's what happens when one dream turns into another too quickly. Not that it matters, my tissues have minds of their own and quickly stitch me back together.

Smooth yet worn. Pillars of rock stretching into a grim horizon, a sea of shadows welling up at their feet. There's little fires up top with shadows tending to them, whispering in hushed voices.

It seems most of the dreams are either some broken memory or a piece of artwork fleshed out into a tangible world. Whenever it's art, it looks like something Zdzislaw Beksinski would paint. Crumbling architecture... trees of molded flesh and jumbled bone, all blood, all dust... weeping suns... there's no meaning at all or perhaps one too deep... too dark... for me to admit.

Heck, pretty much everything I've seen since I died in the city could pass as a Zdzislaw Beksinski painting. Or maybe something by Wayne Barlowe... at least the space monsters.

Oddly juxtaposed upon this hellish environ is me... a shitty knockoff of the almighty nuke lizard... mostly *Spinosaurus*, three cups of baboon-wolf-crocodile-thing, a pinch of existential crisis and maybe just a bit of tengu. Oh well. The music here is nice...

We are light! We are fire! We are serpents of the hallow abode!

We sing with electric flame, we soar entombed in cosmic wind!

We dance free in the stars and heavens alike!

Come with us, be free! Be holy!

Damn it!

#

Fifteen birds... a funny song. Here there are only two birds but they have rings of fire and six wings apiece, so it evens out. I don't make much sense anymore, do I?

The Seraphim circle around as usual, singing and screaming and breaking the ashen skies with their wings of light. Two left. Of course, Leben can always just make more... or bring the old ones back... but it's nice to keep track. Hope for an end... even a painful one.

Holy, holy, holy!

Oh dear...

The black moon...

...the ebony star... I can't decide which it is...

...not as if it matters.

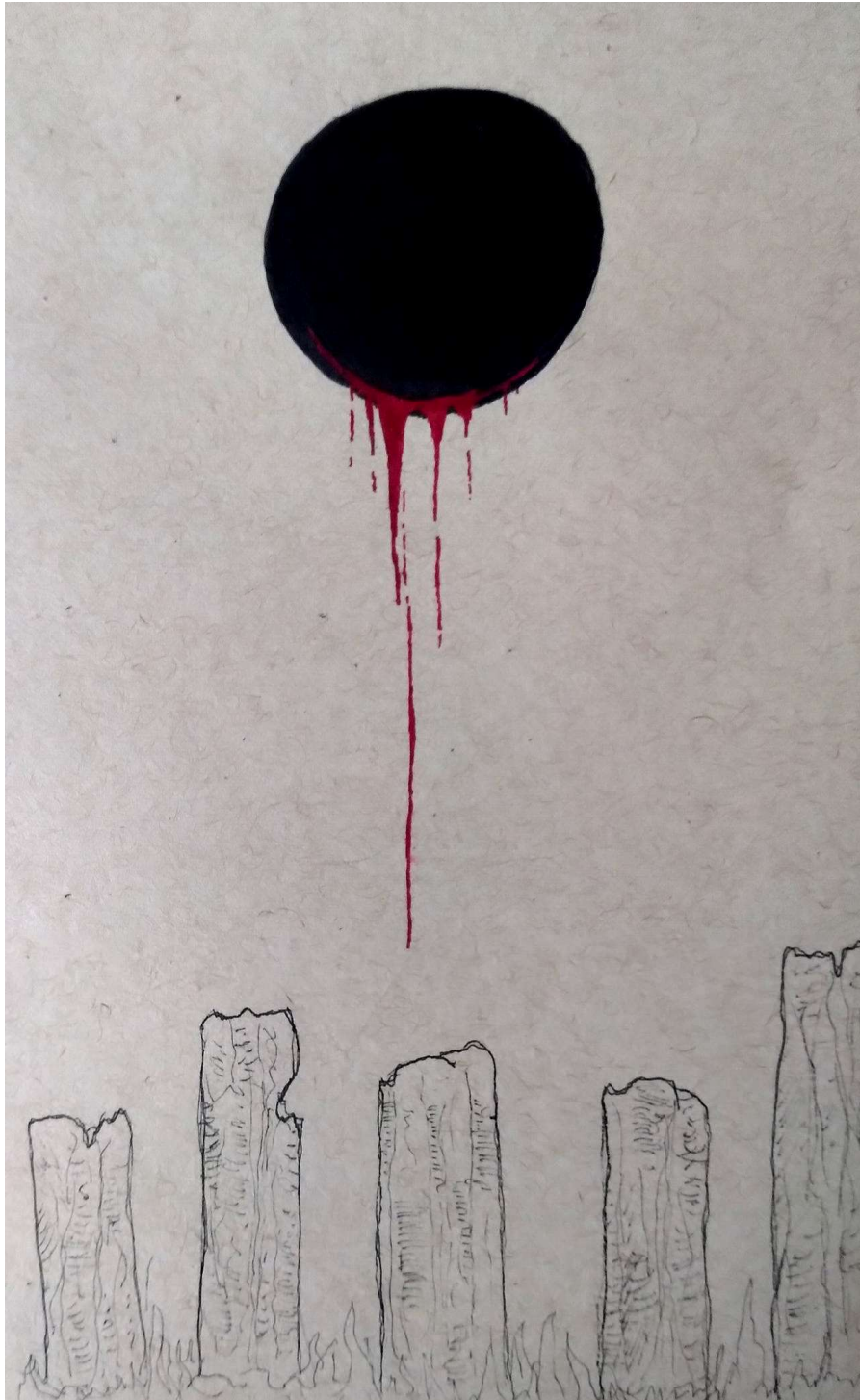
It isn't a moon, or a star.

The good book mentions opening up a bottomless pit... the keys to the pit... the serpent will be thrown there. The one who is named life but thrives on death... a big fucking bird who fucks with my brain and has a thing for whale skulls... you know who.

Locusts come out of the pit, armored and toothed with human teeth... they have the power to bring pain and agony. Their king... the angel of darkness... is named Abaddon.

The black star.

Abaddon appears in the horizon out of nowhere, popping silently into my dream but speaking all the same with a voice like God's. It rises like the sun, outlined in blood red that flows into the dark skies like watercolor, staining the clouds and making them bitter.



“The question is... can we eat it?”, asks a voice.

Atrox. I can't help but shudder at all the memories, even if this Atrox is... something else. Strangely she is massive, just like me, as if she

aligned her proportions to my own for the sake of easy communication. Thousands of feet of slimy skin and toothy smiles. Or maybe not. Size here is interchangeable.

“What the fuck have you been up too?”. I don’t bother with human formalities.

“Livin’ the dream”, she cackles. “Just the other day this shadowy guy with a mask gave me gold in exchange for some magic beans. Sadly, the gold turned to dust. Fucker scammed me out of my beans. So I ate his friend the dragon, who actually turned out to be a river spirit”.

“Why are you here now?”.

“Because the moon told me to come”.

“It’s not a moon”.

“And those birdies are demons but you call them angels nonetheless”.

“Fair”.

“I want to eat them”.

Abaddon seems to swell in the distance, pulsing almost but completely immobile at the same time. The Seraphim dive and swoop in great arcs, not yet willing to fight. They sing, however, aplenty.

#

Obaddon sat on one of the pillars, Atrox on another. They waited, listening as Abaddon spoke silently and commanded the skies.

Everywhere at once but always hovering right in the center of the horizon, humming softly with a voice made to shake the very foundations of existence itself. They could feel it inside them, exploring, but without the intrusiveness of the Archangel. It wasn’t something to be resisted or overcome, as much an unavoidable fact of reality as life and death themselves. Suns could die and worlds could end, but not the angel of the abyss.

#

Atrox stood up, tilted her head to the bleeding star, and screamed. It sounded awfully human.

“What the hell!?” spat Obaddion.

“Nothing better to do”, cackled Atrox, toothy crescent-moon beak twisting into a demented grin. She tensed, then took a leap several pillars over.

“You’re going to try and kill it?”.

“No! I mean... yes! Ah, well, I’d say fifty-fifty...”.

“Idiot”.

Atrox laughed and took another flying leap, bounding off a distant pillar that launched her well into the skies, a pale moon against the silent black, claws spread. The Seraphim screamed and swooped down towards Obaddion.

Come with us, be free! Be holy!

“Eat me!”.

We are you, dust child. We are your blood and your body and your dreams. We are your ideals of Heaven and God, twisted into cannibal demons poisoning as angels, and you fell for it!

He grabbed a heavy spear with a bladed end shaped like a machete, courtesy of some past fight with an angel, and swung it two-handed at the closest Seraphim. It split in half, flopping limply on the rocky pillars, and the blade struck again straight through the heart before the tissues even had a chance to try and realign themselves.

The second struck him from behind, and he twisted around to grab it by the neck and toss it down to his feet.

We are sons and daughters of God! We have touched Heaven and Hell! You are but a pale, filthy ape in a lizard suit, and we’ll eat your soul like we ate your friend!

“Unfortunately, I have the power of plot armor”, spat Obaddion, ripping out the heart and screaming as it burnt his hand. “Filthy fucking space birds!”.

Atrox meanwhile was drawing ever nearer, perhaps further, to Abaddon, and the black moon swelled and dilated across the horizon, dripping with blood and spreading clouds that flowed like spilled gasoline.

She screamed and took a final leap, one that would have placed her right on the angel of the bottomless pit's midnight surface.

With the same instantaneous chaos with which it appeared, Abaddon's black orb split and formed a form anew, spreading across the skies in whirling, flowing strips like scarves... curtains... VHS tape... black as night and indescribable in its abstract nature. A sheer multitude of symbols covered the iridescent surface, bearing forms that were difficult to distinguish between some forgotten language and computer code.

Atrox screamed and fell to the ground, smacking against a pillar in a cloud of dust.

Singing. It sounded like whale song... other things too... the crashing of waves against the shore, a cool fall breeze... gentle humming... like many sounds but none at all... the voice of an angel.

Abaddon's black masses swelled and pulsed, twisting into a spiral, strips of midnight that were as thin as paper but reached up into the heavens. The singing grew louder, and in a cruel instant fractions of the angel's being came crashing down from the center and pierced through Atrox's hide. Red blood splattered against pale skin and dusty stone, its source stuck in an awkward stance, jaws hanging open, claws outstretched and trembling with pain.

The paper-thing midnight tendrils wrenched free and flowed back upwards, smooth and sharp as broken glass, swirling again to join the spiral. Atrox vomited blood and drooped over herself, hanging weakly like an abandoned puppet.

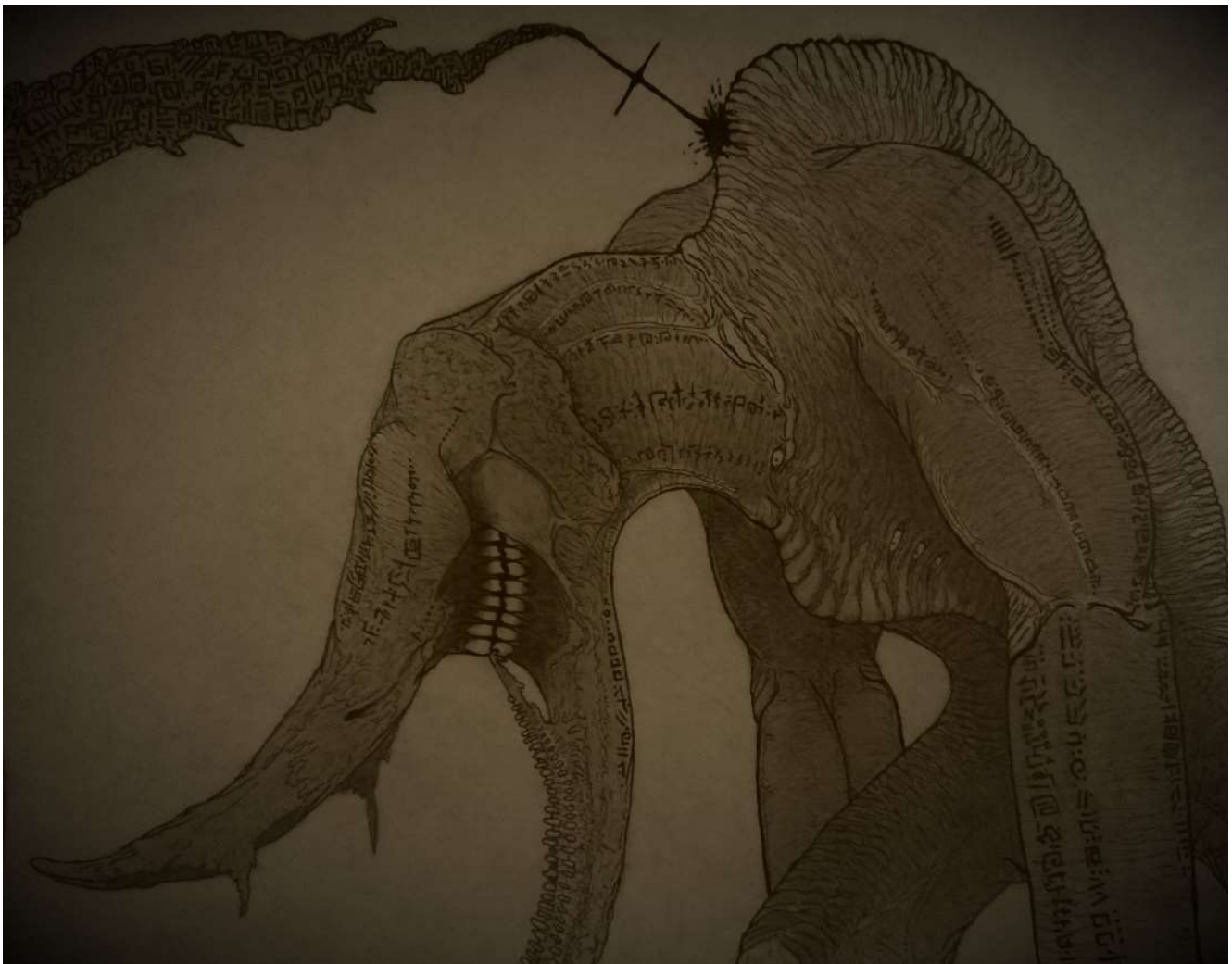
A voice spoke, echoing across the endless pillar-expanse of the dream.

“Go, and kill many people”.

The monster Atrox's back split open, and from it sprouted a black cross. Subsequently, she began to change, growing, swelling, limbs liquifying and stretching ever longer, back bubbling... like how Obaddon grew in the city... from Leben... but this was all a bad dream. Atrox's head creaked as the bones split and formed anew, teeth splintering and falling at her feet. Black light, the smoke of Abaddon, consumed her, and when it finally began to fade Obaddon saw a crescent-moon head emerge with human teeth.

“Damn!”.

#



Now twice her original size, Atrox rose up from the bubbling froth of creation and howled, bearing a body more human, humanoid enough to make it all the more monstrous. She cocked her head and hissed before taking a flying leap and kicking Obaddon across the face.

He spat blood, flying backwards and toppling pillars like dominoes, falling into nothing... into darkness... not again.

Obaddon roared and bounced off a pillar, tackling an incoming Atrox out of the air and crashing back into hard stone. Screaming from both parties as talons tore messy strips of flesh and teeth crunched down on bones. Obaddon caught a blow from Atrox in his jaws, crushing the gangly fingers with a prolonged bite. Atrox screamed and swung her curved head, striking him in the throat and forcing out a splash of blood.

Abaddon swirled above, humming softly in an endless spiral of unknown words.

#

The fight lasted what would have been half a day if time made sense in that abstract periphery of existence.

When it was all over, Obaddon emerged missing an arm, trailing steam from his pores, and passed into another dream, Abaddon still hovering softly above.

#

Lost beyond stories, still they fly.

Sometimes I see the Seraphim. Hear their songs.

I hate them.

I hate what they did to Prophet. I hate that, if Leben willed it so, I would be powerless against them. I hate their incessant singing and my unquenchable thirst for their blood.

Lately my dreams have taken me to nice, natural places.

A good thing.

I sat by the Columbia River the other day. Memories of seeing it before... that region... I knew it when I lived in the woods and I knew it... before.

People made rubber suits for their monster movies, and when that wasn't good enough, they made real monsters. Turns out that the real monsters are just as fabricated, just as much a human puppet, as their latex precedents were. No matter this flesh, this image I've shaped for myself, I am merely a man in a rubber monster suit.

In that absurdity, however, humor can be found.

One Archangel left.

I'm following it... but it isn't coming for me. The others did, but this one...

...it's fleeing

A burst of pride. I've slain dragons and demons and talked with gods, but I wasn't proud of one bit of it. In fact, I hated myself for it. I still do.

All structured, all planned... all the manipulative work of some perverted space angel with a fetish for whale skulls. Leben could kill me if it wanted to, bring back the Archangels with the flick of a wing. But perhaps there's limits to its power. It is not God... its strength is not infinite. Perhaps, by means unknown, it can't bring back the Archangels. So this one might truly be the last, and if so, it's *afraid*.

Afraid. Of me.

Several thousand feet of space monster, afraid, of me.

That is what gives me pride. A good thing, unless it gets out of hand.

Hope. That they might be gone for good, that I might have actually changed things... done something. That this whole fight of mine isn't worthless...

What am I thinking. Better to not get my hopes up. Leben still has the Seraphim after all, even if all seven "died". They'll come back, or it'll make new monsters for me to fight.

So whispers the devil into the ear of all who passes.

*His favorite game is giving torment, using all the keys he can reach,
Then sitting back and reveling in God's tears for humanity.*
Damn, I fell for it hard.

#

Today I walked through an ashen field of old mirrors and family portraits, passed bleeding trees topped with cubes that hummed and spun in slow circles, and climbed an immense cathedral that was skeletal framework in some places and worn concrete in others. A perfect circle had been cut through one of the walls, which I climbed through and found myself in an immense amphitheater.

So, naturally, I sat down and had some lunch.

A sourdough loaf and orange juice. Not in the mood for meat.

I can form things in the dreams... if I really want it. Food if there's a craving, a cross if there's a demonic space bird I want to crucify for eating my friend. I'd do it again for two slices of pizza and a cold drink.

Calming down. The dreams are getting worse though.

I didn't eat the Seraphim... not much of them at least. To be fair it was because they fell into the abyss, but still, I resisted the urge to feed, and as a reward I'm a little more aware, a little less... deranged.

That was a dark time. I don't remember much... besides being mad... and hungry... but I'll probably go to Hell (again) for what I said and did. Dang it.

Still craving it. Everything hurts. You'd figure pain isn't a thing in dreams, but I've had dreams of falling before, off a bridge, and I would feel the impact right as I woke up. They're funny that way. A dream, but my back aches near-unbearably and my skin is raw and stinging.

Atrox ripped off my arm and ate it. I didn't feel it at the time... adrenaline and angel blood I guess... but I certainly do now. Thankfully it's almost done growing back, and Atrox is gone. I smashed her head against the pillars until it cracked and her brains spilled out. I don't feel bad either, because, even if she was... friendly I dare say... she wasn't

herself when she attacked me... that was Abaddon... I'm guessing, acting through her.

If it had a purpose for possessing Atrox she's probably alive and well slaughtering demons or humanity or something, but I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing was just for a certain black star's amusement.

A sun peaks over the horizon and comes into full view. It's a warm, golden sort of afternoon, perfect for an outdoor lunch. The bread is delicious, even without butter. A soft breeze makes sure the heat stays appreciable.

Usually dream suns are red like blood and dream skies are dark, cloudy things or entirely nonexistent, but this is nicer... like a good afternoon. Oddly nostalgic.

I guzzle the orange juice and lay down for a nap.

Naps are nice.

#

I suppose what Ezekiel saw was symbolic for the nature of God. Or maybe Ezekiel was just on drugs.

But it goes unsaid that angels, even the ones that aren't skeletal space whales that are technically demons, are weird as shit.

I fought one like this before. It's levitating downwards, an emaciated human form taller than I am with a missing head and a massive halo of solid bronze.

"What in the crispy Kentucky-fried fuck are you?", I ask, for my own amusement.

It lands beside me quietly and says nothing, sitting cross-legged on a toppled pillar.

I drink the rest of my orange juice and lick my lips.

There is silence save the breeze. Dreams are quiet unless I make music for myself. Now, if only I could remember the name to that song...

It's my mental breakdown and I get to choose the soundtrack!

#

Harmless... innocent... ignorant...

Yet I'm expected to slay the Seven Princes of Hell.

Everyone starts off this way... young... as did I, even if my childhood was in the body of a monster. Something before too... similar experiences... but with less blood.

Was I always this many persons?

An untouched pearl, a devourer of dreams.

An amalgamation of sins, a pillar of flaws.

The waking dream is cruel... art of blood and pain... mine...

...an incel trapped in a dinosaurian womb... teeth and claws and armored scales sheltering the pathetic being within.

One childhood forgotten... another locked away from the humanity from which I derive... the mind of an adult in a body only a few years old.

This timeline...

...arena... fighting...

...it's adorned with fragments that my hands can only turn into hatred and sorrow, a bitter fog of anger and confusion.

I've demonstrated all the ways I'm incompatible with the world... but the eyes of others don't see crutches and a wheelchair, so I'm thrown into the "must not want it bad enough" trash bin. Damage to the mind is as crippling as blows to the body, but no one sees it. They need new eyes...

Eyes... no wonder I see them... everywhere. It's another reflection... a fear of being seen for what I am... judged.

Pathetic.

Every one ties pain with blood and scars... not what's inside. It was the things the audience didn't see that hurt the most... vomiting out my own blood, regurgitating organs that didn't sit well with the rest. The things in my mind too... all fabricated by myself but the likely scenario was that they were all truths... every last one.

No shared hardships, none of those wonderful connections that act as beacons of hope.

Hope.

Fuck it. I don't care if it sounds edgy.

It's not a phase, mom! Hah!

Humor is a nice thing. Mine was always... a bit abstract. But nothing here is normal, to the point where when things are (always at a first glance) it's more disconcerting than if they weren't.

Speaking of, my new angel friend's still just...

...he's just standing there...

...*menacingly*!

The maniac is in the mailbox!

I laugh a bit, and I guess the noise is enough of a trigger to spur the angel into leaping upwards and emitting a metallic screech.

Oh well. I was doing so good with my diet...

Not me.

It's one of those wingless penis dragons.

Indigo with a pale, iridescent sheen, it's beautiful, even if it looks like a worm. Tiny eyes on a blunt head, smooth with shark's teeth. The creatures of fantasy are always a little off here.

The dragon swims through the sky, ringed body pulsing as it swerves and curls on itself. When the slimy coils touch they ping like steel, and its voice sounds like a bell. The sun hits it just right, and its colors turn from indigo to an ocean blue.

It crashes through the cathedral with a wailing, ringing, siren sort of scream, catching the angel in its teeth and bashing it against crumbling foundation stone. There's that familiar blood smell... sweet... and in an instant I...

#

To be completely honest I forgot.

When I came back to my senses, the cathedral was a heaping mess, and the dragon... I'm guessing it was called Wrath... is a half-eaten pile of viscera. I'm missing an arm and a bit of my stomach, but not for long as

I quickly grab some of the dragon's... penis worm's flesh and assimilate it into my body. I don't want to eat... more... and loose mor of myself. Even if I'm hurting.

The angel is lying against a broken wall with its innards spilling out and an arm half-eaten. I'm guessing he... or she... or it... is decent enough, so I hand it some of the dragon flesh so it can heal. A humming sound, the only noise it's made, and with its one good hand it regrows its stomach and the broken arm. By then I've already shifted into a new dream. The smell of an angel's blood was getting to my head.

#

Another dream.

A canyon of lilacs... beautiful...

...gently obliterated by the wheels of a fallen Ophanim.

Wheels and eyes in its purest form.

Seven Seraphim made anew. They pry apart the interlocking spokes and rims of eyes, devouring the burning mess within. The dying Ophanim sounds like a screaming choir.

Before I can get to them, they're gone.

But nothing's gone forever.

A clear sky... an empty canvas.

Rain.

I sit down and watch the lilacs grow anew.

#

I'm a fuck up.

The flesh of the dragon's awaking it again... the beast.

It's no surprise that I'm this way.

After all, I'm not the result of love.

Maybe the old me... the ancestral soul locked in those odd memories occasionally bubbling to the surface... but all the more likely it was the result of peer pressure, out-of-control hormones... animalistic desires... I have them too, and when I was alone in the cell I did some things I regret.

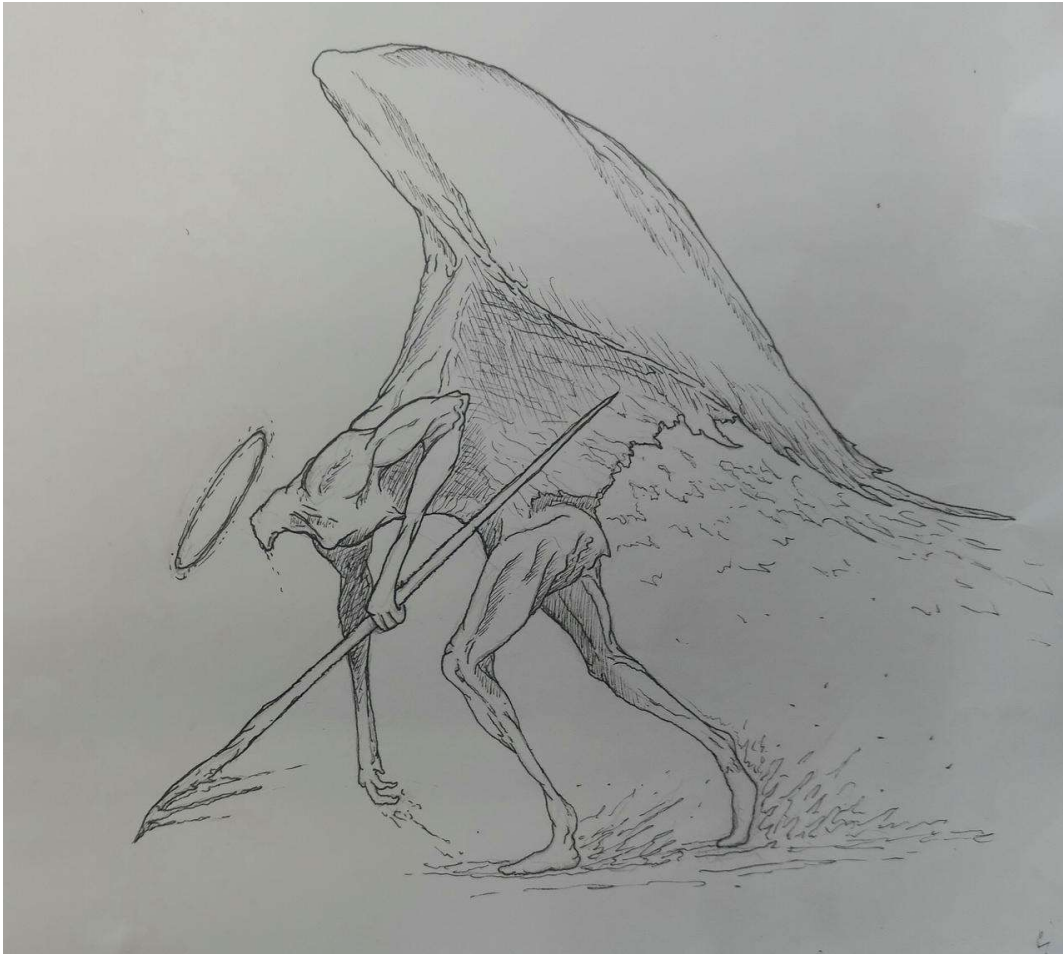
But this me? The one they call Obaddion... the monster?

There was never any love... any care. I was always just a toy... a replaceable asset. No one ever wanted to show me anything besides a world of concrete and blood and pain. A bit of kindness... yes... but it never lasted... more so a fascination with my eating habits than true concern.

How can I learn to be anything but a bloodthirsty beast when those who raised me showed me nothing else... not even the light of the Sun?

Leben's a liar... less infinite than it says... less powerful than it seems. Its strength is in words... deceit. Souls are a finite resource... I've taken so many and made them into me... this body... several thousand feet of corded muscle and skin tougher than steel.

I'm strong... strong... stronger than most things. A menace to the Heavens.



Sometimes I get too close... the dreams draw a little too far into the truth... and He sends His angels, the truer forms of those beasts I crave. Disemboweling cherubim... beating the Archangel Raphael over the head with an Ophanim's wheel. Memories made in bloodlust... they remind me I have no place in Heaven.

A spear through the face, a sword through the chest. I wrench them out with a demonic grin... because enjoying the monstrosity is better than hating myself for it. Slice through the arteries and taste the blood... a while without pain... why did I think I could ever resist it?

I wish my claws could tear out my own violence, that my teeth could break the urges that bind me to this sinful nature... wings to carry me away from this all. I wish my eyes could look into the soul... that my

brain knew how to mend it... that my heart was strong enough to resist the currents of this wild world... and the inner evil that is myself.

But here I am...

...rocking like a hurricane!

Don't sue me... all I have is angel blood. Besides, I sound like a hurricane when I roar.

Weak and defiled, twitching from enduring unspeakable things. I pass into another dream... a sandy beach with chattering gulls and dry grasses... there's bleak, old townhouses with peeling blue paint and white edging, a few cabins too.

I move inland and wade into a lake. The lily-pads are so thick that their stems choke the water, a labyrinth of twisting vines and tendrils... the water is black as oil and cold as death. I clamber on a little paddle-board and float out to the center where it smells like blood. I'm small... is this a memory... or perhaps just for the sake of better experiencing the quiet waters.

A smell like rotting meat, there's bloated frogs and half-eaten fish floating to the surface.

Something fucked-up is living here.

Honey... cinnamon... warm oatmeal with a spoon of brown sugar... an Archangel. I dive down into the black waters, swimming deeper where it's chilly like ice, and pass into my final dream.

Chapter Twenty Four

Stairway to Heaven

“I’ve been meaning to ask... is this Purgatory or something?”.

“No, this is Patrick”. Obaddion laughed as they watched a bug crawl across the railing.

“Why are we here?”.

They were on a gigantic suspension bridge overhanging deep blue waters, waters that divided the land like a river but were very much a part of the sea. Scattered around were islands of pine trees and houses, though in many parts it was mostly houses.

“So many questions”. The boy turned to him. “You drove past here from time to time. It’s by that stretch of beach you like, the one with all those concrete blocks piled up. You’d walk out on them and watch the fish, on nice days at least”.

“It reminded me of... a show I liked to watch... some old dinosaur documentary, the one with the *Liopleurodon*”. Obaddion folded his arms and rested against the metal railings of the bridge.

“Too bad they weren’t really twenty-five meters long, eh?”.

The metallic groans and roars of cars jostled the air as they passed, an undying swarm of streamlined, multicolored flies. Wind blew softly against the afternoon air.

“They can’t see us, can they?”. Obaddion noticed he was no longer massive here, having somehow returned to his former several-ton weight. Still big, but not big enough to kill an Archangel.

“No. We’re just reliving a memory”. The boy adopted the same posture as Obaddion, muttering something about his back. “One we all share”.

“*We?* Damn, is this dream an ogre, because it’s got *layers!*”.

“You’ll see. Have you ever had any dreams about... falling?”.

“Yes... lots”. Obaddion watched the cars nervously. He had never really been fond of them. “Mostly when I lived in the cell”.

“I died here. Almost. But it wasn’t so bad. At least I overcame my fear of heights”. The boy broke into a dry chuckle.

Obaddion peered over the edge and saw blood on the rocks below. “You...”.

“They say that octopi are pretty common around this bridge...”.

“It wasn’t an accident, was it?”.

“Of course not! I’m not *that* stupid”.

“So now you’re here, like me”.

“For now”.

A semitruck rushed past, shaking the bridge.

The boy turned to him with a slight grin. “Would you like to know how monsters are made?”. Another semitruck rushed past.

“I’m guessing they used you”.

“Exactly. You see, the monsters in the arena were all once normal animals, generally cheap, common ones like rats and chickens, that were modified as embryos to create completely different creatures. They talked about deconstructing chicken embryos to get dinosaurs, right? Stretching the tailbone, growing teeth on the beak. That’s what most arena monsters are. They grow a few extra organs to add in though, because usually the originals don’t work well. Special mass-produced lungs and hearts to support such huge, misshapen bodies, you know. As for Obaddions, well, they needed brains. I guess they wanted something that could fight smart, use moves and stuff. And, seeing as Obaddion was turned into a TV villain, a bit of personality too. For most monsters they just drug them to make them angry, but that always just leads to a lot of biting. It gets boring. They wanted something smart”.

Obaddion was silent, but he watched the boy with wide eyes.

“You understand, don’t you”. He grinned. “They used me. I guess cloning is a bit cliché, but that’s what they did. There’s a whole factory

full of... full of me. They use these big, hanging tarp-things as artificial wombs. We're born in a bunch of oily fluid that smells like piss, cut loose, and killed. Butt-naked, alive for maybe five minutes before they take out our brains. Do you want to know how many of me they've made?"

"I... I..."

"All those old memories, you knew they had to be from a past life... and, well, that life was mine. Don't worry, it wasn't very grandiose. Your personality was influenced by mine from the day you awoke in that cell, you became me, almost me, but with just a bit of savage animalism to keep it in check".

"So I'm just a fucking clone..."

"Technically yes". The boy gestured to a couple of heron-like birds flying low over the water. "Those are cormorants. Always nice to see actual seabirds here, it feels like crows are overrunning the place sometimes".

"You get distracted easily".

"And you cuddled with an anime plushy".

"It was wholesome... and better than concrete".

"True. I guess you are still your own individual anyway".

"Makes sense. We may have the same memories, but my personality's been shaped differently. I've led a different life. I guess that's a good thing, at least I'm sort of an individual". Obaddon watched the clouds shift above, moving to reveal blue skies and sunlight. "I miss my plushy".

"You don't know how disconcerting it is to hear a giant monster that just ate an eldritch abomination alive say it misses its anime plushy".

"Aren't I a character?". He cocked his head and grinned.

"Better than most, even if you committed mass genocide".

"To be fair, I didn't know I was human".

"You just saw humanity as an enemy. I did too. You see, all it takes are a few negative interactions early on to mess someone up. Get bullied a

bit, ignored by the others kids, and you'll come to think you're hated. You won't see them as beings who share the same desires and sorrows as yourself, they'll turn into enemies. When people reject you you'll reject them back, even if deep down you just want to be loved and accepted. It sounds like pansy talk, but it's true. Those bad things early on, they made me lose my connection with others. I turned to where I felt safe, to my monster movies and dinosaur books. And I identified with them, because everyone seemed to be out to get them too. Eventually, you convince yourself you're a monster. Eventually you'll hate people, you'll fear them and tell yourself you want to be alone, because even though you just want someone to care about you, you'll be too scared and messed-up to face it".

"It helps when you're literally a monster". Obaddion's quills quivered softly in the wind as drunk driver in a rusty van sped past. "But I don't have to face them anymore... just the memories. I'm not stuck in the cell now".

"You avoid them because you're afraid".

"Of what?".

"Of being judged. And hated. That is what drove you to despise them in the first place, knowing that they thought you were hideous, that you were stupid, that you were a horrible monster and nothing more".

"I did what I did because they tortured me!". Obaddion turned to him, baring white teeth and bleeding gums. "Spare me this philosophical bullshit! I was always trapped, always in pain, and it was their fault! I just paid them back".

"If you were simply mad about how they treated you, you would have just fought against your keepers, not humanity as a whole. But they hated you, and you knew that. Seeing no hope of ever being cared for and accepted, you turned to violence. Sadly, revenge can't fill that hole in your heart, and we both know people will only make it bigger".

"What can?".

“Nothing. I guess we just live with it... or give up”. The boy leaned a ways over the railing, almost hanging over the bloody rocks below, but drew himself back. “Seems this isn’t a dream you can wake from”.

“Perhaps I can... into another”. Obaddion groaned, rubbing his eyes to be sure that the Archangel ripping through the skies and descending down into the waters below wasn’t a vision. “Ezekiel’s visions... wheels of fire, wheels of eyes... after the eons I did not die a grandiose death in the hellfire of man or in the teeth of gods but faded weakly into my own twisted dreams with a manufactured soul and brooding flesh spurred to carry a misguided vengeance against that from which I came. It speaks with memories that aren’t mind and walks along the eyes of others, seeing into worlds not fully realized, gorging on the bloody splatter of heavens and ejaculations of angels... demons... all interchangeable. From whence came the Archangels? Heaven or Hell, God or Devil? Angel or demon, both the same. I see them now, as blood on my hands”.

“Damn, I really should have drawn kittens or something”. Shielding his eyes with one hand and clutching the railing with another, the boy braced for impact as the Archangel began to slosh through the blue waters, staining them red.

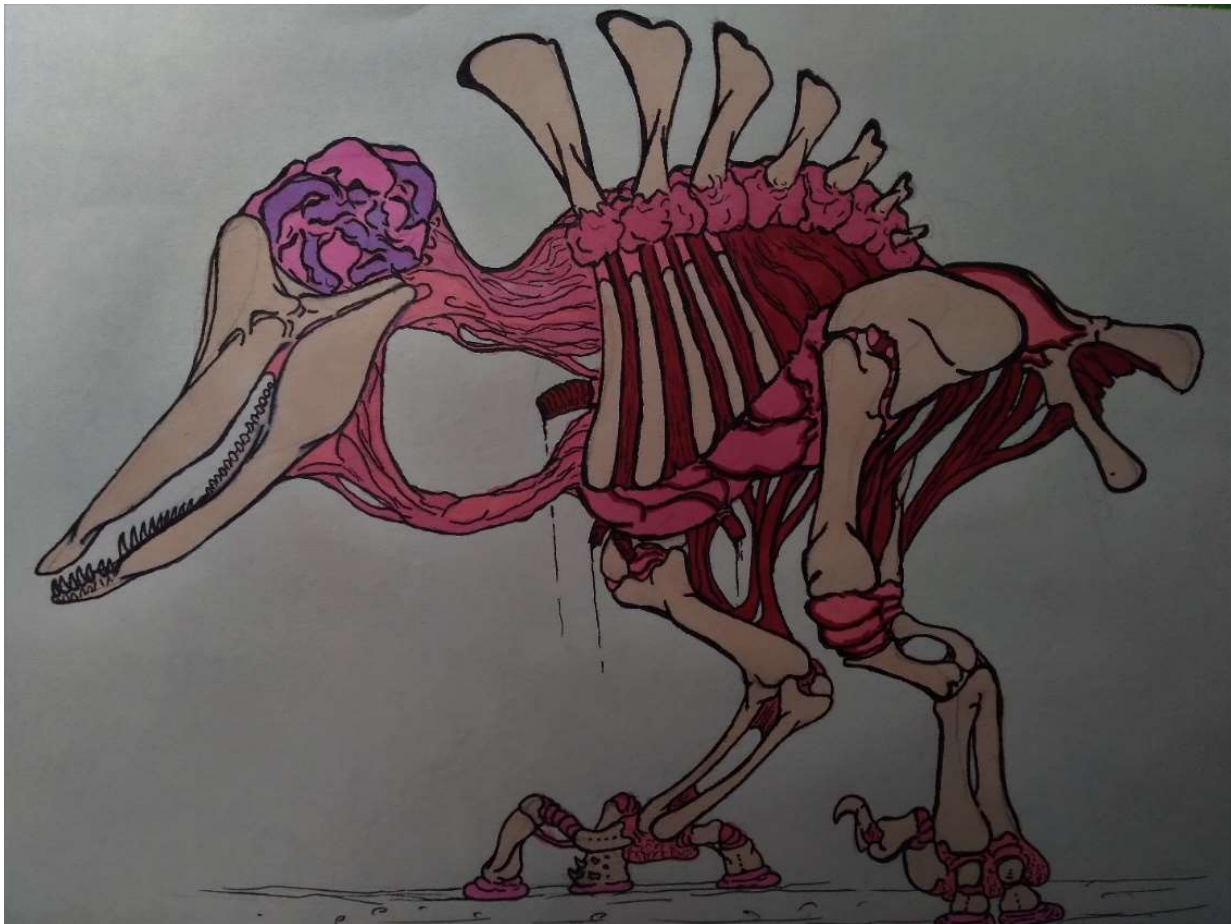
“Wha...”.

“These things aren’t really physical beings, you know. But they aren’t on the same higher plane of existence as normal angels, because their souls are bound to these bodies. Most are like Leben, existing in the mind, in visions, just barely able to enter our reality. Imagine a three-dimensional character trying to interact with a two-dimensional world. Archangels bridge the gap by having angel souls and “flesh” bodies, which allows them to cross into our reality while still technically existing in their own state of being. However, these bodies aren’t physical flesh and blood. I don’t really know what they are. I don’t really know what any of this is. But I do know that we can’t really comprehend their true forms,

so our minds subconsciously assign them an image to which they adhere. I guess it keeps us from going crazy trying to comprehend them”.

“So the way I see them is based off some prior memory... a drawing?”.

“Yup. I got it put on a T-shirt and everything”.



“And me?”.

“Run-of-the-mill kaiju OC. I drew you a lot when I was little”.

“We really do make our own monsters”.

“Now we must figure out how to defeat them”. Vast clouds of birds swarmed over the bridge in a fit of panicked desperation. Even memories could learn to fear the Archangels.

“You mean?”.

“Better yourself. Your stubbornness is a double-edged sword, believe me. I have it too. It keeps you from turning away from your beliefs, gives you the strength to endure hardship. It’s what kept you fighting for so long back in the cell, and it’s what’s driving you on now. But it also keeps you from breaking past yourself, from your hatred, from your flaws. You can’t change, at least not easily”.

“Did you ever manage to?”.

“You should know well enough. I’m you. And I didn’t. I couldn’t overcome my flaws. I couldn’t convince myself I was worth something, that life was worth living. I kept reminding myself of the negatives, of my problems, and it consumed me. It’s no good to be blissfully optimistic, but you can’t sink too deep into cynicism either. It’ll destroy you”.

“I suppose I’ll meet the same fate. Heck, I already did”. Obaddion managed a weak chuckle. “I’ve been trying for so long... but then things get bad, and I always revert back...back to hating myself. And others”.

“You only ever hated them because you were afraid. Because they hurt you, and you convinced yourself that they were the enemy, that the world was against you”.

“The world is ambivalent about me. It doesn’t even recognize I exist. And that, well, that’s even worse”.

“So that’s why you’re really fighting the Archangels”.

“To prove I exist...”.

“I never fought any abstract soul-eaters”. The boy nudged a pebble off the bridge, not caring to watch it fall. Obaddion licked his lips at the smell of angel’s blood. “But I worked out, and did sports, and worked my ass off to get good grades. And I hated it. I didn’t care about it, I didn’t enjoy it, but I did it anyway”.

“Why?”.

“Because it justified my existence. The things I truly loved and cared about didn’t matter. They were just odd hobbies, pastimes. Worthless to the world. So I forced myself to do things I hated so I would have value,

so I would be something... and not nothing. But it was too much, and gave too little, so I... gave up. That, and I was a temperamental psychopath barely passing off as a functioning human being”.

In the distance, the Archangel’s halo flashed to life above its head. Blood gushed from the womb, and the immense bony jaws began to creak open. In places the sea spoiled and turned black.

“You see Obaddion, the world doesn’t want us, even when we try to fit in. I couldn’t be like them, and it wasn’t okay to be myself, so I tried to escape the only way I could. Seems that doesn’t work either. But if I’m being honest, I kinda liked working out. And I guess it benefitted you, even if it was painful”.

“It taught me to be strong... subconsciously”. Obaddion licked his lips. He was getting hungry. *But maybe it’s not a good idea to have another taste...*

“That, and your brain... my brain... eh, *our* brain, it tried to grow your body like mine, like the form it was used to. So naturally you got bigger arms, but a shitty lower back”.

“Explains my weird hair”.

“And your teeth”.

“I’ll be using them soon”. The Archangel was drawing closer. He could almost hear its voice reaching out to him, a gentle voice, like a mother...

“That’s the last one, right?”.

“Yep”.

“Then this is the end”. The boy stood up and stretched. “Our own little Revelations. It could use some music”.

“Ever heard that song about the Russian guy?”.

“Rasputin?”.

“Could use that one right about now”. Obaddion began to clamber atop the railing, perched like some kind of misshapen bird. He smelled the warm, sweet smell of death as it lumbered on rotting legs and grinned.

“I should get going”, mumbled the boy, looking up to the skies, and for a split second Obaddion glimpsed the Seraphim circling above like vultures. Their halos shone even in broad daylight, and their skin was like snow. Even so, he knew them to be nightmares.

“They’re coming for you, aren’t they?”.

“I fell for Leben”. The boy looked him in the eye and trembled, ever so slightly. “You did too, but you’ve been given a second chance. So be careful with how you think. It’ll consume you”.

“Why are you here?”.

“So you can make peace with yourself”.

“I don’t think I ever will. But perhaps I can atone for what I’ve done... in blood”.

“Don’t repeat my mistakes”. The boy was tearing up, just a bit. “Please. There’s people that care about you... us... and I won’t ever be able to see them again. But you might... just... please... don’t let your hatred consume you like it consumed me. Find it in your heart to be happy, to love again. Don’t be afraid of the world, or yourself”.

“Thank you”. Obaddion managed a weak smile, and found he himself was trembling with watery eyes, as if he were sharing in the boy’s sorrow.

“For what?”.

“For caring”.

“It’s self-centered of me at best... but... you’re welcome”.

“One more question”. The Archangel was beginning to charge up its halo.

“Sure”.

“What is your name?”.

“You want to know your real name?”.

“Yes. I want the closure”.

“It won’t do any good. You’ve identified as Obaddion your whole life. And besides, even if you have my brain, you’re still an individual.

What matters is that you know who you were, and who you are. Names are just labels, but, if it makes you feel better, your... my name is...”.

One of the Seraphim landed behind the boy and ate off his head.

His corpse trembled a bit before it collapsed, red with blood.

I suppose even dreams can bleed. Obaddion readied himself for a fight, but the Seraphim disappeared, gone with its victim. Now there was only him... and the Archangel.

“Aren’t you tired?”, spoke the voice, though not from the rigid skull. “It’s all so difficult. Give in to me, and I’ll let you sleep. You won’t have to worry about these things, it’ll be like back in the womb. Just have a little taste...”.

Obaddion found himself growing, descending down from above and into the waters with a splash, taking down the bridge under the weight of his tail.

The Archangel groaned and shot out tendrils from its mouth, imbedding them in his skin, burrowing inside him, tainting his blood...

Fuck off!

“You’re so tired... you’ve worked so hard. Become one with me and sleep... you don’t have to be strong anymore...”.

I said fuck off!

He grabbed one of the greasy ropes of flesh and yanked it towards himself, pulling the entirety of the Archangel with it. They met with the skidding of frothing surf and spilled essence, bashing their heads together, exchanging souls. Obaddion looked straight into the Archangel’s maw, the very teeth of the grave, and pulled his own toothy mouth into a smile.

Then he planted his foot right in one of its decaying hearts and sent it flying across the waters with a kick to shake the heavens themselves. His crest was red with its blood, having pierced through the seemingly indomitable skull. A scream issued from the Archangel’s throbbing mass as it collided against one of the islands, and before its limbs could realign

themselves and force it on its feet Obaddion was there, tearing loose a rib and beating it over the head.

One hand swung the rib, beating it against the skull until it broke, while the other ripped at the bulging, pulsating flesh of its abdomen. His teeth glistened in the daylight and fell hard upon the iridescent brain, sinking deep into grey matter and tearing it loose. The nectar was upon his tongue, and try as he might to fling it away he could not help but taste some... and hunger for more. It only fueled his rage, and he began to bite at the masses of hearts, hearts that also digested and birthed, hearts fashioned from his own twisted dreams.

The Archangel kicked him away and lifted its head with trembling, jerky motions. Obaddion grabbed the tip of its mouth as it began to open, bearing the full brunt of a veritable tidal wave of blood launched from the tubes within. He was sent rolling against the waters, kicking up surf and tearing up the bottom of the sea. How much had he grown? Beyond man, beyond beasts, beyond buildings and the old things lurking beyond, tall enough to greet the Archangel face-to-face but not strong enough to overcome himself. The smell of blood was in the air, the nectar of angels, and his old hunger had awoken.

What would happen when the final Archangel breathed its last? It was a truth only he could devour...

Obaddion reared up with a scream, shielding his eyes as his opponent unleashed another slurry of foul liquor. It burned like hot oil, eating away his eyes and bubbling his skin, and the flesh on his forearm melted down to the bone. Not that it mattered. He was powered by stars and fed by gods. What was lost would be regrown.

In vast multitudes upon the flesh, writhed and amassing but ever together, ever apart, one but many. Humanity survived upon a several-thousand-foot-frame, walking as it shouldn't, tasting a world where it didn't belong, tasting existences beyond itself, adjoining with others and becoming a false god, a fallen angel... it breathed blood that burned like

fire, birthed souls with hearts that ate them like stomachs, consuming its own children... wheels and eyes in the mouth, there but not, as much a dream as reality, a creation of God!

He took a flying leap and kicked it straight in the face, flinging himself behind the stumbling carcass of a body and sinking his claws into soft meat. With messy, jerking motions he tore out one heart, then another, digging around for the intestines and yanking them out like tangled ropes, flinging everything into the bubbling, boiling mess that was the sea.

“They said in the final days the seas would turn red”, hissed Obaddion as tendrils shot out from the Archangel’s heaving mass, forming hands, human hands that grabbed at his throat. “And from them would rise great beasts. Symbolism I suppose, but here we are”.

He grinned as a splatter of hot blood hit his face, even as the skin melted away. It smelled delicious. His opponent kicked weakly in a sea of its own fluids, skeletal limbs twisting and creaking like old trees, immense mouth still searching for flesh to taste. Finding himself grabbing it with two hands and twisting, he snapped the Archangel’s jaws with a sickening pop. Steam erupted from the waters, flowing up from a hellish ocean to join the clouds.

Everything reeked of the nectar, of honey, and cinnamon... mother...
Still alive...

Obaddion looked to the heavens and roared, collapsing against the weight of his victim. The smell invigorated him, and with shaking limbs he rose up and began to feed.

#

Another moment of clarity. I met myself. He was nice, I guess. A bit odd, a bit easily distracted, but who am I to judge?

The last Archangel, the 7th. It’s dead, though it was never truly alive to begin with. What made it move and breathe is rising free in vast golden columns. Into my mouth. Tasting delicious, angels, humankind, becoming one with me and growing my body ever larger.

At my feet the water bubbles and pops. It's red, boiling, and *alive*. They're in there too. I drink the sea, even though it burns my tongue.

I guess I can't resist... the memories all come back... cheering for my pain, mocking my sorrow. Leaving me alone, to suffer. Killing me again and again. I've found that with each victory over an Archangel I lost myself a little more, becoming one with all the souls I consume, sharing their blood. It isn't me... no... the voices who will me to feed sound like the boy... thousands... an angry choir. All those made in the organ factories, cut up and put into monster bodies... made into Obaddions... all me... all me!

They reminisce upon their deaths, their unnatural births. Abandoned by God, abandoned by those whom they thought cared for them. Dying alone in themselves, valued as nothing more than parts for an ungodly machine of tempered meat. Every last one wants me to feed, wants to become one, wants to steal others down from their ascent. All they ever knew was pain, but they were born wanting something better. Now they command that others shall share the same fate... and I... I'm not myself... not in control... I must listen...

They wished me a monster, and I complied.

Again and again, reverting back to the same flaws, the same problems. Eating just to fade away the pain, soaking in blood. Everything itches and burns.

I must break free.

I can't be this anymore... this body... walk this dream.

My jaws still taste flesh, filling my stomach with all the peoples of the world. But I don't want to taste them anymore. I just want to be alone.

Something's forming inside... myself. The others are taking over... all me... commanding this body... thousands of feet of nightmare devouring the devourer... consuming the grave... it's as much their own body as mine.

Now would be a good time to leave. My stomach becomes a womb, piecing together what little isn't the souls of others... the blood of angels. It gave me such power, immeasurable power, enough to snap the jaws of the grave and eat its brain... but I don't need it anymore. My work is done... the Archangels are all gone. Now I can finally rest...

I feel myself slipping free of the titanic muscles, spine reaching up past the tallest islands, touching the clouds. The water doesn't burn anymore... I don't taste anything... good... I'm tired... too tired to eat... I just want to rest...

A memory dawns of myself, my own individual, the clone from whom they took my brain. I asked what was going on. They ignored me. I was strapped down on a table and wheeled into a bright room, my head stuck in some kind of machine... it hurt. They broke my brain. No one answered when I screamed... screaming for help... I thought I could trust people...

I still hate them.

#

"Hello Obaddion". The voice is kind, albeit sad.

"Prophet?"

"I haven't prophesied once my entire life. But yes".

"I'm... sorry".

"For what?". I can't really see, just feel. I hear its voice... it's calm... and friendly.

"For everything... for being mean... and eating your corpse".

"I don't mind. It was an ugly body anyways. Besides, the truth is, I was just like you. I spent so long hating everyone, being mad at the world, mad at God. I needed something to blame... an enemy. No one even cared I existed until I started destroying things... being a monster".

It puts a hand on my shoulder. This time, I don't shy away.

"I have to apologize too".

"For what?"

“For getting you addicted to angel blood... and dragging you down all of this”.

“It was the only way to defeat the Archangels...”.

“And I hate myself for it. It’s been destroying you. You could have been free, and lived in peace...”.

“I chose to fight them. A matter of pride I guess... I couldn’t help it. Now I’m not sure it was the right thing to do... now I’m not even sure I’m myself”.

“If it helps, I spent five hundred years trying to decide whether or not I was the Devil”.

“You’re too good for that”.

“I’m every bit as flawed as you, and with less reason to be that way. The things you went through... I can’t blame you for hating them”.

“And I can’t help but hate them”.

“Not everyone is bad. I’m not saying this for their sake, but for yours. If you don’t find a way to forgive... to make peace for yourself... it’ll consume you like it consumed me”.

“A friend told me something similar”.

“And they’re right. You have to try and find happiness”.

“But I can’t! I’ve tried and tried and I always just end up getting hurt... I was made to kill... to destroy... to be a monster. I can’t do other things”.

“Remember in the cell... you made art”.

“Yes...”.

“Did you enjoy it?”.

“Yes... but it was worthless. No one cared that I did it. My only value was fighting”.

“When you lived in the woods, didn’t you enjoy the sun? Watching the birds?”.

“I did... and it was beautiful...”.

“Did it give you value in people’s eyes?”.

“Of course not”.

“These things may have not given you value, but you enjoyed them. And they weren’t bad. You don’t have to define your worth by what people think. Because, truth is, people will always hate you. They hated you when you were a human, and they hated you when you were a monster. Don’t try to earn the approval of the world, because you’ll never get it. Ignore them and do the things you love. Hold those who care about you close...”.

“No one’s left. You’re all gone...”.

“We’ll be waiting for you”.

“Where?”.

“In paradise, of course”.

“I don’t belong there... I mean, look at what I’ve done! I’m a murderer... a cannibal... a dirty, fucking pervert! I’m awful, and when this nightmare’s finally over I’ll go down to Hell just like all the other Obaddions... just because the world hated them so they hated the world back...”.

“No you are not! That wasn’t you...they pumped you full of drugs and hormones and turned you into an animal... no, worse... just like with the angels... it wasn’t your blood and you weren’t in control. Everyone’s done bad things, and everyone can turn down a better path and still be forgiven. I’ve done many of the same things as you... consciously at that... and you don’t think of me as awful, right?”.

“You managed to break past your sins... who you were... but I can’t!”.

“Yes you can! There’s still time... and there’s people who care about you... people you were taken from”.

“I was awful to them too, wasn’t I? I’m awful to everyone... it’s all I learned back in life. I’ve fought and hated since I was a boy and it’s made me horrible!”.

“You were confused... and hurting. As a result you lashed out against the world... but the world can’t be stopped. You can only hope to last through it and stay true to yourself”.

“There’s no world left for me. Just a bad dream...”.

“That’s why you’re getting a second chance”.

“You mean...”.

“Angel blood is a funny thing. We lose our bodies but our souls don’t go just yet. You’ve accumulated so much power that you can break back into physical existence... just barely. You can live again”.

“What will it be like?”.

“I don’t know for sure. You won’t have the same strength as you do now. You won’t walk in dreams like you once did. The world is ruined in many places... and most people are gone. But you’ll be able to walk under the trees... smell the beach... bask in the Sun’s warmth. And perhaps in such beauty you’ll find it in yourself to love again”.

“It would be nice... I guess... but I’m scared... I don’t know... I was happiest with you in a way, even if I didn’t admit it... because you were the only living thing that ever saw something in me besides a monster... a stupid animal... you were the only one to ever truly care... I don’t know if I can ever find it in myself to enjoy life, not after... you know”.

“And you never will if you don’t try and find out. Heaven’s door is opening up, and God’s crying for those he lost. You’re a tragic being, scarred by the greed and malice of a world you never deserved to experience, but if you can overcome the pain you’ll be stronger than ever before. Remember the good things... remember to enjoy food... and make art, and it’ll carry you through...”.

With that, Prophet’s voice was gone.

#

Obaddion tore through the flesh of his stomach, bursting free in a spray of blood. His eyes held a savage, desperate look, arms pushing the clumsy body loose from thick, syrupy meat. The gargantuan cosmic entity

he had commanded for so long grew still, upper body slumped loosely over the steaming remains of the Archangel. Without puppeteer it was a limp, useless doll, made in his image but no longer him. It never really was him to begin with, just a vessel for his rage, his addictions, his refusal to turn away from his own broken nature.

The color in its skin began to die down, blood seeping into the waters. His puppet grew pale like ash and dry like dust, slowly crumbling away. He remembered summertime in the forest, watching cicada larvae crawl up out of the earth to dry themselves on tree trunks, shedding their old bodies and leaving behind pale, dry husks. Prophet completing its third instar... like beetles.

He had completed his.

First a boy.

Then a monster of flesh. He died once, came back, grew, and died again.

His soul grew strong upon the souls of others, finally powerful enough to break the laws of existence, the fabric of reality, and tear its way into physical being. He wasn't just a dream anymore... a memory... he was *alive*.

The water below had begun to cool. It was still red... smelling of angel's blood.

Again he felt the craving... just for a little reprieve... a little bliss. It would make him happy... and so powerful.

Not this time.

Obaddion plunged into the sea that had dwelled in his memories for so long, finally there at last, and swam to shore. In the water he almost thought he could hear voices... himself... still wanting revenge. He ignored them.

It was a sunny day, warm to a point of comfort but not exhaustingly hot. Blue skies and clouds, but the sea was red and stunk of decay. He shook himself dry and watched his old body begin to slowly waste into

nothing, flesh unbound by his soul sloughing messily into the waters or drifting away as dust.

The Archangel's unholy remains were melting into the sea, leaving behind a disjointed skeleton and piles of bubbling intestines, fading in and out of reality. Soon it would disappear.

He was back... back on solid ground... with a real body... he...

I exist!

Fought his way out of hell, eating demons, slaying dragons...

Only a few souls would ever know besides himself, and that was enough.

How many years since he last truly touched the Earth? He just wanted to rest.

#

Stairway to Heaven. Who knew you had to kill an angel to open it up?

I need to stop calling them that. They're just demons, demons takings the names of what they once were in vain. The halos, the light, it was all just to mess with me. Raw iconography to break my brain and twist my ideals, make me fear and hate even more than before. It worked.

The light is the most brilliant thing I've ever seen. I never appreciated it before, because my hunger for its power consumed me. But now I'm... sober... heh, heh... and the nectar is simply a thing of beauty. I don't need to take the pain away anymore, and I don't need to hold on to my hatred. I can let it go.

They're *free*. I can just barely see them... millions of souls... voices, rising in columns from the steaming brain and joining the heavens, bright like stars, flowing like a river... I can't describe it! But they're free! Free from my old body... free from the Archangel... free...

Wait...

Deep down I always knew... just tidbits... the familiarity of the Archangel's womb... the dream with the boat people... the one I screamed for when I first fought Atrox...

He told me there were people who... cared for me... my family.

Here they are. No bodies... those are long-gone... just light.

Still, I feel the warmth, the familiarity. I don't remember their names or faces but I remember the bond... I remember being loved.

One of them beckons, the light reaching out to take my hand.

I know where they're going. Paradise. Prophet will be there... maybe my old self...

No...

Monster.

I can't go...

Murderer.

But don't want to be alone...

You don't belong. You'll just end up hurting them.

Maybe it's for the better.

#

Obaddion stared down his family, picking out the human shapes in the light, human hands.

Then he looked at his own hand, a hand with claws, the hand of a monster.

He started forward, reaching tentatively to take his... *mother's*... hand and go with them to paradise. To leave his body and the world and enter a new one... somewhere without pain.

But then he stopped, and pulled back.

A human soul was inside him, but he wasn't really their child. Alongside the mind and soul of a boy was that of a beast, he was just as much the animal in the forest as he was a human being. He could never replace the one they lost, never approximate to him.

Obaddion looked at them one last time before he turned and fled.

#

“Aren’t you going to go with them?”.

It was Prophet.

I don’t know. I’m not really... you know... and they’re not really my family. And I’m scared... I don’t want to leave yet, and I don’t belong up there. I’ll just end up scaring them... hurting them, because that’s all I’m good for..

“So you’ll stay down here for now? And live alone?”.

For now.

“That isn’t what you really want, is it?”.

I thought it was... but...

...why do I still feel broken?

“Because you didn’t have faith in your own path”.

I...

“You know, you can join us, whenever you feel ready”. He felt a surge of energy, wingbeats, perhaps, and could just barely see Prophet, no longer a monstrous beast but a force of pure light, soaring up the stairway to Heaven.

“Thank you, Obaddion, for seeing me as something other than a monster”.

#

He ran until he grew tired and walked until the sea to his right was no longer red with blood. An hour or so seemed to have passed, and the columns of light were still rising from his crumbling remains and the boiled mess of the Archangel, mountainous against the distant islands.

There it was, just like his memories suggested.

It was a quiet stretch of beach, rocky and bordered by a small, forested cliff. The trees were lush with reddish trunks and a warm, healthy sort of forest floor. A pile of cement blocks ran out into the waters, acting as a makeshift dock.

The waves lapped quietly against the shore. He sniffed some seaweed, picked up a crab and ate it. Seagulls gathered on the far end of the concrete dock, watching curiously only to scatter as he made his way up and walked to the very edge.

Overhead the sky was a clean blue with sparse clouds. Branches rustled softly in the wind.

He sat down on the edge of the dock, tail drooped over the sunbaked concrete, and looked out into the horizon for something he knew he would never find.

Finally alone. Finally without the need to fight. Finally free from his cell, free from that twisted state of dreams and memories. No people. Peace and quiet, just as he wanted. Alone.

Obaddion finally broke down and began to cry.

Epilogue

Sometimes I still see angels.

It's nice, in a way.

For the first couple of weeks I didn't know what to do with myself. For awhile I was overwhelmed by it all... I mean, I was basically a god at one point... and now I'm back. A little smaller than in my first life... thirty feet instead of fifty. I guess I couldn't grow back all the way, or maybe it's just because it's easier to move around and do things at a small size.

I suppose it's like that feeling when you've had something keeping you busy for awhile and you finally finish... the death of a project. Mine was killing the monstrous, ethereal fallen angel things binding humanity to Hell. Now there's no more angels to kill... dreams to dream. I sat by the beach for a few hours and cried until I couldn't anymore. Then I just watched... the light... like a sunset river. We never belonged here in the first place, so the best way of describing it would be... freedom. The sea boiled with red as the two immense corpses jutting out of the water began to fall apart and melt.

Now they're gone, but the bones remain. An eternal (so I hope) testimony to my existence. The monstrous vertebrae touch the skies like pale trees. Seagulls have begun roosting on the Archangel's fractured skull, even though it wavers in and out of reality like the ripples of a quiet sea.

Reality. Nothing was ever quite real in the dream... pain and taste and sound but they were all just a little off. Of course, that doesn't downplay getting my brain fucked by a two-thousand foot cross between abstract art and a whale skeleton, because those sorts of things only happen in dreams. In retrospect I don't regret it... character building, gruesome though it was. Pain is funny that way... it's incredibly

educational. Prophet said something like that, though it may have been a joke.

Prophet.

It said it was my guardian angel. I believed it. It had a halo after all. Of course, the Archangels and Seraphim had halos, and they were technically demons, so that kind of raw imagery can't always be trusted. Even so, Prophet was good and Prophet cared, which is something I never knew before in all my years in that lonely little cell.

We had quite a few conversations in the mind realm... which is probably Hell... but I feel Hell is quite different all the same. This one always stuck in my mind... surviving what may have very well been decades of crazed, drug-addled bloodlust:

"I still can't make any sense of it". I was sitting on the rusted fragment of what was once an Ophanim's wheel. The hollow sockets of the eyes would make for good cupholders.

"Do you need to?". As always, Prophet had that grandfatherly sort of nature to it. When it talked it sounded like a wizard, or a real prophet, but it told me it just took the name because it sounded cool.

"I suppose the key to understanding the incomprehensible is recognizing that it is incomprehensible in the first place. But still... I want to understand... it hurts not knowing".

"Some things are simply beyond us. We can't hope to understand them, never will, and can at best flow with them. Like when you're at the beach and the waves knock you over. Sometimes it's better just to let them carry you".

"But what if they carry you out to sea?".

"Then swim back".

"That's debatable".

"So are many things. But would you rather everyone think the same as you? Then you wouldn't be anything special".

"At least... if there were others like me, then I wouldn't be alone".

“You have me... besides, don’t you like being alone?”.

“I like being alone because I’m scared of people... there’s still that basic want for companionship... and more... but I’m too afraid to try. I can’t talk to them... they’ll kill me if they get the chance, or worse. It’s something I want but will never have the strength to attain... and you look like the devil”.

“According to dated European depictions, yes, I do look like the devil... but you know well enough that evil never takes such an obvious form”.

“Are you really an angel?”.

“Do you want me to be?”.

“What do you mean?”.

"I mean that what lies beyond your long-dead body... this "dream"... it may not be Heaven or Hell as you believe them to be... it may not be anything people expect... religion was always just a means of interpreting it... and perhaps you'll find that divine things aren't clouds and cherubs, demons aren't horned imps with wings... but you can call them that if you like, because in this state you need something to tether what you see to what you know".

"I'll just keep calling the space monsters angels". I remember watching as an Archangel vomited blood that seemed to drift in the skies at times and flicker like flame at others.

"Do as you will... it's your dream after all".

"Why am I having it?".

"To come to terms with what you will wake up to".

#

I miss Prophet.

#

Months passed since I broke the beings tying souls to the grave. As inconceivable and distant as they were, the Archangels still touched physical things and destroyed them. Everything around the scene of the

fight is derelict... in the dream it was inhabited but when I awoke I found that the buildings had been empty for years. A few drones and helicopters came to see the corpses, and teams of people came to collect samples from what remained, so I suppose that I didn't really wipe them out. I hid in the trees and watched crows fight over a leaf.

Birds. Leaves. Living things... I can touch them, and I know they're there. For awhile I explored the woods, watched the sun rise and set. It was nice. When I was hungry I ate, and the food was real.

#

Generally I just feel the presence of diving things passing through... they disguise themselves as my own thoughts. That's all Leben really is in the physical world: the inner evil, that dark bit of your mind that urges you to do awful things. Even so, sometimes the light wavers in constitution, and I get iridescent, flickering visions of the angels. One of the headless humanoid sort passed through today, emitting a low humming through its halo. For a split second I saw it lumbering through the sea, and then it was gone.

Angels.

I call them that, just as peoples of ages passed dug up the bones of animals long-dead and called them dragons and cyclopes. The reality... the wooly rhinos and mammoths those bones belonged to... was different, but it was nice. I suppose Heaven will be that way... unless my dreams were Heaven... perhaps they were, perhaps Heaven is something you make for yourself.

My memories began to come back in full force after I broke into reality. Damn, come to think of it, I literally willed myself into existence. No wonder everyone was trying to kill me. Now I'm basically a buffed-up dinosaur and can't will things into being or kill eldritch abominations, but that was all a matter of pride. Of course I had other reasons and I veiled the truth under them... a cowardly denial... but when I was aware and not in a state of mindless rage I kept fighting angels because I wanted to be

strong... something impressive... so I could feel I mattered... that I was successful. I had that problem in my old life too. But I suppose that true success isn't necessarily achievement... it can simply be procreation... or perhaps just finding happiness.

I've grown to understand myself and my motivations, which is a thing most individuals haven't achieved. However, it isn't all that impressive when I think about it. It's like knowing something is wrong but not knowing how to fix it. It's easy to see that the car won't drive, but figuring out how to solve that problem is a rare skill.

Anyways... in the past I liked nature, and not in the artistic, simpler appreciation I have for it now but a deep desire for knowledge... to understand it... I've always wanted to understand things and that's what made the dream so maddening. I grew up with dinosaurs being cold-blooded, tail-dragging lizards and as I grew the science changed... turns out they were intelligent and warm-blooded and some of them looked like birds. A different reality, but a nice one. As it is something completely beyond me and perhaps not even itself in the sense I know it, Heaven will likely follow the same rules, if the angels are anything to go by.

Of course, considering what I've done, I probably won't go. Monsters don't belong in Heaven... not at least Heaven in the traditional sense. Honestly, the fear of Hell drives me more than an eternity with clouds and cherubs. Maybe it'll be different... like the dream... perhaps the dream was Heaven... but I suppose that's my artistic side yearning for something abstract and monstrous... paradise would have to be something that appeals to the masses. Maybe it's different for everyone... maybe a changed state of mind... or maybe God's the tyrant I always thought him to be... and up there is an eternity of worshipping his name. I was always taught to never question God but I naturally have a questioning mind... I can't help but contemplate things, after all God gave me a mind to make honest use of it... and more than once the thought has crossed my mind that the mind behind creation is not entirely benign. Seeing the angels

brought back memories of reading the Old Testament... God wasn't exactly friendly back then and seemed to have a penchant for violent animal sacrifices, among other things. I suppose that, just like everything else I've been through, maybe it's just a reality I have to accept. If I ever meet him I'll ask him why he decided pubic hair was a good idea.

My current stance (though I may not ever know for sure) is that God is less so a humanoid entity and more so a raw... I dare say atmospheric... force. He always manifested himself as fire from the heavens... thunder... powerful things but not a physical entity. An air of salvation... yet a cruel end all the same. Something beyond a god in the traditional sense... like nature but grander, in its real form... there's a love for everything made but also rules... fear... fear works better than kindness for ensuring obedience, and Hell is a pretty decent means of deterring me from massacring children. Again. I hate myself for it.

There's no solid proof of Heaven or God and no point in looking for it. Such things don't have a place in one's conceptual grasp. I tried to prove it ages ago because I wanted to understand everything and find meaning in everything. Of course, one can always try, but sometimes things can't be understood... but that isn't bad. Believing without proof... tangible reason... that is what faith is after all. Yet, what, if anything, made God? Why is existence a thing? There is matter and light and life... the rotation of planets and lives of stars can be explained... one can document the spawning rituals of rare fish... but science cannot explain the very root of existence and neither can religion. Even amidst the old things and waking dreams I was seeing but a fraction of all there is... there's worlds out there we can't even begin to comprehend, and those who claim otherwise are just as foolish as those who believe that Adam and Eve walked with dinosaurs on a planet only two thousand years old.

There's nothing wrong with questioning... doubting... again, God made brains to think and wonder and contemplate... at least I hope he did... but at times it seems he desires blind obedience and faith above all

else. I can understand... it's like parents with their children... but parents can be abusive sometimes. Either way there's no fighting it.

I suppose violence has just as much a place in creation as peace... it's violence... explosive, bombastic violence that births that life-giving light of the sun after all. Of course, that doesn't mean violence is a good or desirable thing. But it has its place, just as flies and rats have every right to walk on the same ground as I do.

Kindness is a funny thing, as is love. In a way it is against human instinct, even if we are social creatures. That is what makes it powerful. By nature one serves themselves first, if we went purely by animalistic tendencies everyone would steal and kill and descend into permanent anarchy. It's easier to destroy something than it is to create, and, by showing love (not the sexual kind), one is defying the nature of the apes from which they came, which is an incredible thing. Showing kindness to animals, in a sense, is even more incredible, because they are not of one's own species and thus there is even less point in caring for them, especially the ones that can't be used for any sort of work. When I was walking with different feet and living a different life... that of the beast inside... I kept snakes, some of the most despised of all creatures. And I loved them. I had a beautiful carpet python for a few years... it was a golden yellow with a cream belly and black bands, and never once tried to bite. During a busy time it got a cut on its stomach that I didn't notice... it got infected, and I couldn't afford a vet trip. I was young at the time. I spent a month swabbing it with sulfadiazine and giving it iodine baths to treat it... but it didn't work. I spent a month watching something I loved slowly die... that's when things started to get bad.

It was just a stupid snake.

I grew up being told the things I loved were awful... beings in the image of Satan (turns out he's a perverted space bird). No one was sorry when it died... the sadness I felt was ridiculed. I was always just a joke to begin with and so were the things I cared for... even as a monster I am

nothing but the biological version of a cheesy television villain, and not a very original one at that. The things I valued were deemed worthless, intertwined within me so as to constitute myself, yet I was expected to take myself seriously.

To understand Hell one has to see past the mention of fire and pain and ponder the most meaningless, desolate places in their soul. Heaven perhaps is not true bliss but a heightened existence of sorts... the fulfillment of unrealized wants and needs. We were made in the image of God, but perhaps it was his intellectual image. Perhaps what ties humanity to him is our innate creativity, that desire of the artist... the writer... the filmmaker... that old yearning to create worlds and characters and things... unable to mold suns from dust we compensate with paintings and words... but it doesn't fill the holes in our hearts. I've wandered to the limits of my understanding a number of times while contemplating these things. It is a good way to pass time.

In my limited understanding of love and life and morals I cannot hope to truly define them or force my own views of them on others, which is true of many other things. One thing I know for sure is that morality isn't tied to appearance. Thinking otherwise is a flawed mindset. Prophet looks like a demon but is the nicest thing I've ever met. Human circumstance creates a radically limited and peculiar notion of what existence is and our place in the world as well as the place others have in it.

Take frogs for example. They are not as smart as a person, yet they undoubtedly have a perception of the world and interpret its phenomena by their own means. If a frog saw the workings of the heavens it would formulate its own appraisal of the situation, one limited by its rudimentary understanding. The reality of the world embraces the frog's inadequate notions and exceeds them. My time in the dream was possibly an exceeding reality... something that has always been there but was never noticed, and I believe the concept of things like Heaven and Hell to be the

same... perhaps altered mindsets that change one's perceived reality more than anything else.



#

I found a nice place to live by the beach. It used to be some kind of small seafood factory, but whatever hellfire the Archangels unleashed

wasted it away into three stories of cracked, dust-coated concrete with a broken roof and hollow windows. The intricacies of dirt and cracks running along the rough cement are a beautiful sight, in their own way. There are flies but flies are everywhere, and I have no scars for them to breed in. I haven't had to fight since the last Archangel... something I'm thankful for. If I look out on one side there's rippling blue waters and an old wooden dock... just the barnacle-laden posts in some places. Cormorants roost under it... there's a couple dozen at any given time, and they're quite fun to chase.

The roof is mostly gone except for an abstract bit on one side. I sleep on the floor underneath most of the time, letting the afternoon sun drift across the rubble until it lies golden on my side... it's beautiful. There's always a cool breeze from the sea, so I'm never dangerously hot. When I get uncomfortable I just swim, something I'm good at. I have the entire beach to myself, too.

A few months have passed here. I like to wander through the abandoned cities and scavenge... there's blankets and canned food and many other useful things. I tried beer once... and when I woke up I was quite a ways inland sleeping on someone's roof.

I found a farm and tore down leafy branches to feed the goats. They were scared of me, so I hid and watched them in secret. Later I ate a cow, which was good. It took me three days to find my way back to the beach, and by then it had begun to rain. I took a nap under my little concrete roof and watched the rain. I loved it.

Finally... there's peace. A good thing.

Prophet visits sometimes... I don't see it... but I feel its presence in my mind.

"Come to think of it, I've never asked about this... but didn't the Seraphim kill you?", I ask. I don't hear words, but my brain finds the reply to be something like this:

I lived, bitch.

Of course, Prophet doesn't swear, but I find the statement amusing. Prophet's good that way... it reminds me of my grandmother in its aged innocence. Well, not *my* grandmother. If I'm going into technicalities, she was the grandmother of the human child from which the clone they used for my brain is derived. I don't have a family... not truly... and the memories I have of those relations aren't really mine. They've shaped me nonetheless. I fear the judgement of people I'm not tied to... they'd be ashamed of this potty-mouthed, angel-killing mess of a boy... beast... I'm truly neither. I also desire their love... something I shouldn't want.

These are things I'm beginning to overcome. I've finally found my place in the world... a peaceful life by the beach... swimming, eating... I found some paint and pencils the other day and drew the angels. As my memory comes back so does my skill... the leviathans strutting on my lonely walls far exceed the scribbles in my cell. I'm happy... I don't need violence or people's approval to be that way either.

#

Another month goes by. Midsummer passed with sunny days... August ended in a bit of rain after weeks of grey skies. It's September. My last.

I carved my name into a tree, seeing as I won't have a chance to do it later on.

My body is back and free of scars... but that doesn't excuse the poor construction with which I was made. Those organ transplants kept me alive far longer than I would have lived on my own... forcing me into years of pain. It seems an Obaddion can only last several months on its own... without repairs it begins to... fall apart.

I don't eat anymore. I'm dying. So there's no point in taking life to support one that's ending soon anyway. The tissues grow weaker day after day... I can feel my muscles failing... it's harder and harder to walk. Now I mostly sleep.

#

My forearm fell off today... the flesh was pale and stringy, crumbling like cheese in places. I watched the birds eat it and fell asleep.

#

I'm scared. I don't want to die... I've only just found happiness... a place for myself, and it's being taken away. However, I cannot hope to truly understand the nature of my experience, and perhaps this is not truly the happiness I desire.

#

It's nearing the end of September. There's been frost a few mornings now... the sight of the dawn sunlight reflecting off of it is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. My skin is sloughing off in places... I breathe open-mouthed constantly because my lungs are starting to fail... so is my heart. It's not so much a painful thing as a tiring thing... everything's dull and sleepy, losing its grip. The nerves are going with everything else... I have a hard time just drinking water.

#

Another week. I haven't left my little rubble stronghold in a while... drinking the puddles of rain keeps me going. I love rain.

#

You're very tired, aren't you?

Prophet?

Who else?

I'm not ready yet... I don't want to go back...

It'll be different this time. Everyone can be forgiven... even you. You hurt a lot of people, but they drove you to do it... and you also saved a lot of people by killing the Archangels. There was a reason you were placed in that path... a good one. You'll be just fine.

Are you sure?

When you awake, you'll be with me in paradise.

#

I want to keep waking up and watching the sun rise... watch the rain trickle down my walls. I want to keep swimming in the sea and napping under the trees... making art... exploring. When summer comes I want to look for frogs. I want to live the life I was born wanting... see the people my stolen mind desires.

I don't really know the intricacies of this life, and I doubt I ever will. I don't know what comes next either. That's fine... I'll take it for what it is and enjoy it as best I can.

The sun's setting... I love the sun, it's an object of life and beauty and in its combination of life and death it proves an ideal embodiment of what I see in God. The amber and salmon coats the sky as it settles down to sleep, the waters shimmer like fish, and I feel my heart begin to fail. I don't mind... I want to see Prophet... and those I knew before. No one will rejoice in Heaven... if I go there, and that's fine. It's only a glimpse of an embracing, incomprehensible reality after all.

We are, perhaps, given these bodies purely to experience living... the consequences of actions... the suffering we can cause others. That, and the sheer wonder of creation itself... the miracle of existence. All according to plan... all to prepare for what comes next... perhaps in what awaits those who desire it will be given the power of creation, with living a physical life a necessary trial to give them a better understanding of how to manage their own makings.

I've decided that the dream of life will end as dreams do, abruptly and completely with the awakening of the sun, and in the waking world the dream will seem faint and trivial, even if it was meaningful when I had it. I suppose when everything ends I will look back at my actions and deem them foolish, but life seems to be a test, refining process of sorts, and the trials I endured can't all be meaningless. Pain is just as necessary as pleasure, and forgetting it would mean forgetting that I lived.

"Life is but a dream".

Prophet?

“Awaken”.

END